

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BULGARIAN SENIOR MILITARY LEADERSHIP IN
WORLD WAR I: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE BULGARIAN ARMY
OPERATIONS AT DOBRO POLE AND DOIRAN IN 1918

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ABSTRACT

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BULGARIAN SENIOR MILITARY LEADERSHIP IN WORLD WAR I: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE BULGARIAN ARMY OPERATIONS AT DOBRO POLE AND DOIRAN IN 1918, by CPT Ivaylo Ivanov, 138 pages.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

Whether we support the brute and cruel military struggle or not, whether we are mild peace-lovers or adherents of power, the ghost of war constantly impends over the peoples, and they--willing or not--are compelled to draw the sword. . . . Today or tomorrow, it does not matter when, we will be forced to put our [military] forces to the test, make the nation go through new trials and, if we do not wish to be wiped out completely from the stage of history, we have to draw lessons from our successes, as well as from our faults.

— Col Dimitur Azmanov, *Urocut ot Dobro Pole*

Every nation has moments of glory and periods of deep gloom in its history. Days before the end of World War I, in the autumn of 1918, Bulgaria was on the verge of one of the greatest catastrophes in its history. In September the same year, the Allies achieved their long-desired decisive breakthrough of the Macedonian Front, after the Bulgarian Army had been successfully defending it for three long years. After the collapse of the defensive lines at one of the most restricted sectors of the front--Dobro Pole--the logical sequel in the plan of the Entente Salonika Army, General Franchet d'Esperey, was the defeat of the Bulgarian troops blocking the Allies' access to the major lines of communications up the Vardar River valley west of Lake Doiran. Entente victory there would lead to the rapid subsequent occupation of Bulgaria by the allied troops, which would include Serbia and Greece. A situation like this at the end of the war would give these neighboring countries a justification to claim possession of the occupied territories, which would magnify further the scale of the disaster for the Bulgarian people. However, the First Bulgarian Army, and the 9th Infantry (Pleven) Division in particular, not only defeated the joint British, French, and Greek offensive at Doiran, but also created the

conditions for a decisive counteroffensive. Even though the feasibility of such an operation is arguable and its significance for the overall outcome of the campaign, had it been conducted, is debatable, the 9th Division inflicted such heavy casualties to the British Salonika Army that it was incapable of conducting any further offensive operations.

The defense of both Dobro Pole and Doiran represented a huge challenge for the war-weary Bulgarian troops and an ultimate test of the Bulgarian senior commanders' tactical skills and leadership qualities. These two operations appear to be an appropriate point of reference for analysis of the factors that influence the decision-making process and the conduct of the operations in an environment, characterized by stalemate and protracted engagements, which have a significant impact on the physical endurance and moral hardiness of both the troops and their commanders. It is, therefore, the intent of the author of this thesis to analyze in detail the Allies' breakthrough at Dobro Pole and the successful defense conducted by General Vladimir Vazov at Doiran during the final stage of World War I on the Macedonian Front.

The first of these battles, the breakthrough at Dobro Pole, is considered by some authors "one of the few overwhelmingly decisive battles of the First World War"¹ leading to a subsequent defeat of the Bulgarian and German forces on the Salonika Front in the autumn of 1918 and contributing to the collapse of the Central Powers' alliance. Doiran, on the other hand, is an example of a tactical level operation that spoiled the Allies' strategic intent to achieve a swift advance towards Skopje and Sofia, thereby forcing the Central Powers to divert part of their troops from the Western Front, thus allowing the Entente to achieve superiority there.² During three successive campaigns

from 1916 through 1918, the Entente Salonika Army commanders were not able to successfully penetrate the Bulgarian defensive lines between the Vardar River and Lake Doiran. The author of this thesis will examine the factors that led to a Bulgarian defeat in the first case and victory in the latter, analyze which of these factors was of the greatest importance for the outcome of the operations, and assess what lessons, if any, are applicable today for the contemporary Bulgarian Army development.

The operations at Dobro Pole and Doiran were the culmination of the Bulgarian three-year effort to achieve its national objectives by participating in the Great War on the Central Powers' side. Despite the desire of the Bulgarian government and Tsar Ferdinand to maintain neutrality, the political and military conditions in the Balkans in 1915 dictated that Bulgaria supported either of the military blocs in order to achieve its political objectives. The strategic location of the country made it an attractive ally for both the Entente and the Central Powers. The aspiration of the Bulgarian political elite to achieve national unification, cancel the unfavorable clauses of the Treaty of Bucharest signed in 1913,³ and Germany's guarantee to fulfill the Bulgarian demands, led to the government's decision to enter World War I by joining the Central Powers. Bulgaria's strategic objective was to reestablish control over the areas, which lay within Bulgarian ethnic and historic boundaries as of 1912.⁴ This goal, however, did not coincide with the more limited theater strategic objective of the Central Powers: defeat the Serbian Army, thereby achieving control over Serbia and Macedonia and opening the ground lines of communication between Germany and Turkey.⁵ Furthermore, the desired end state for Bulgaria--national unification--was not included in the military convention signed between Bulgaria, Germany, and Austria-Hungary on 6 September 1915. As it would

turn out later, this caused significant disagreements among the coalition partners during the course of the campaign with respect to the objectives they had to achieve.

The negative effect of the misalignment of the political objectives of the Bulgarian government and the rest of the Central Powers was further aggravated by the lack of unity of command on the Macedonian Front throughout the entire course of the campaign. The command structure, established by the German Supreme Army Command [*Oberste Heeresleitung—OHL*], provided little latitude for the Bulgarian Army senior commanders to make their own decisions, seize the initiative, and exploit the opportunities they saw on the ground.

According to the military convention, the coalition troops, operating against Serbia in 1915, comprised of the Austro-Hungarian Third Army, the German Eleventh Army, and the Bulgarian First Army were under the overall command of General Field Marshal August von Mackensen. The plan of the offensive against Serbia envisioned that the three armies under Field Marshal von Mackensen's command advanced along three converging axes towards Kraguevac with the objective to defeat the Serbian Army. The Bulgarian High Command's concept of operations was nested in the overall coalition plan. First Army under the command of General Kliment Boyadzhiev had to advance along the Morava valley towards Nish, linking up with the Eleventh Army. The Second Army of General Georgi Todorov, which operated under the Bulgarian High Command's direct command, had the task to cut the lines of communications of the Serbian Army in Macedonia in order to block their retreat to the south and prevent their reinforcement by the Allies' troops based in Salonika, thereby creating the conditions Serbia's ultimate defeat (see figure 1).⁶

First Army advanced along 240-kilometer wide avenue of approach, defeated the opposing Serbian units, thereby taking control over the Morava River valley by 6 November.⁷ Meanwhile, the Second Army seized Skopje and Veles within a week, completely isolating the Serbian Army from the Entente troops.⁸ Having achieved its initial objectives, the Bulgarian High Command formed Operational Group North with the First Army and part of the Second Army to conduct the Kosovo offensive operation.⁹ By 24 November, the Bulgarian troops seized Pristina and the whole Kosovo Pole without any significant resistance by the Serbian Army, forcing its retreat into the Albanian mountains.¹⁰ The Operational Group South, comprised of the Second Army units conducted a defensive operation in order to block the Entente advance up the Vardar River valley aimed to reinforce the Serbs. After a successful counteroffensive operation, General Todorov defeated the Franco-British troops and, following their retreat on 11 December, reached the Greek border.

However, the Bulgarian units were ordered to halt their advance at the border by the German High Command, which stated that continuing the operations on Greek territory could potentially provoke Greece to join the Entente (which happened anyway later in the war). Even though the Bulgarian Commander-in-Chief, General Nikola Zhekov, insisted on exploiting General Todorov's success in order to secure the army group's southern flank and deny the enemy the opportunity to reorganize its forces, the German *OHL* imposed a defensive concept of operations. The adopted approach forced the Bulgarian Army to start preparing defensive positions along the border, which would become known as the Macedonian Front. Apparently, the German High Headquarters'

directives did not envision ultimate defeat of the Entente forces in the Balkans, which was in fact the operational objective of the Bulgarian Army.

The Bulgarian High Command's approach is expressed by Colonel Stefan Noikov, chief of operations of the Bulgarian Active Army during the war: "Establishing defensive positions is worthwhile, provided they will be looked upon as a temporary condition only, dictated by an urgent necessity. Furthermore, this is a condition, which we have to seek to overcome as quickly as possible."¹¹ The goal of the German command, however, was different: the Bulgarian troops had to be employed permanently on the Balkan Front in order to fix the Allies troops in this theater of operations, thereby preventing their use elsewhere, mainly on the Western Front. Germany was content with the fact that it was able to create "the largest concentration camp for the Entente in Salonika," using minimum of efforts and limited involvement of its own troops.¹² Although the Bulgarian planners clearly saw the potential risk for the overall success of the campaign by losing the initiative and allowing the Entente to build up its combat power in Salonika, the senior military and political leadership was not insistent and demanding enough to convince their German counterparts that these conditions might have significant consequences for the outcome of the war.

As already pointed out, from the very beginning of the campaign the German *OHL* established a command structure, based on the military convention signed between the two governments, which provided General von Mackensen with significant independence and excessive control over the Bulgarian troops on the Macedonian Front. He received directions from the German *OHL* and very often his decisions were not

coordinated with the Bulgarian Active Army Headquarters, commanded by General Nikola Zhekov.¹³

Even though in August 1916 General Zhekov assumed direct command of the First and the Eleventh Armies, this was not a result of the increased level of trust on behalf of the German High Command towards the Bulgarian Army leadership. It was rather a consequence of the involvement of General von Mackensen in the Central Powers' campaign against Romania, which decided to join the Entente camp at this stage of the war.¹⁴ Although the Bulgarian commanders had demonstrated their capabilities to successfully lead their troops during the Bulgarian Army campaigns in the three wars, preceding World War I,¹⁵ the lack of confidence of the German generals in their allies persisted. Thus, in October the same year, General Otto von Below was appointed commander of the army group, formed by the First and the Eleven Armies. Following the instructions of the German *OHL*, he extended further the level of control by reorganizing the Bulgarian units under his command and introducing corps headquarters. As a result, the discontent among the Bulgarian commanders and troops mounted and the gap between the allies widened.¹⁶

The lack of unity of command, the perception of weak Bulgarian leadership among the troops, especially those under German command, and the transition to defensive operations in a situation where the Bulgarian Army was close to the enemy's ultimate defeat, had a significant demoralizing effect on the troops. Furthermore, the complex command relationship between the allies significantly reduced the flexibility in exercising command and control, the level of responsiveness to enemy actions, and the ability of the commanders on the ground to plan and prepare for future operations. Over

the next three years of static warfare, these negative factors accumulated to bring about the Allies breakthrough at Dobro Pole in 1918, which, in most authors' opinions, was inevitable, just like the ultimate Central Powers' defeat in the war.¹⁷

Besides the political and military conditions, described above, the economic situation in Bulgaria was another major factor that had a strategic impact on the events in the autumn of 1918. Although, according to the military convention, Bulgaria was supposed to participate in the Central Powers' campaign against Serbia with a total of five divisions, the Ministry of War mobilized eleven infantry divisions. Six of them were deployed along the border to operate in Serbia and Macedonia, augmented with one cavalry division and one separate cavalry brigade.¹⁸ The reason for this large-scale mobilization was the lack of any clauses in the military convention to provide for coalition actions against Greece and Romania, both Bulgarian former allies and foes, should they decide to join the Entente.

Furthermore, due to the government's inability to foresee the inevitable long-term involvement of the country in this resource-consuming conflict, toward the end of the war Bulgaria had implemented what is referred to as a "total mobilization." The overall number of troops mobilized over the course of the war is estimated at 1,200,000, which was nearly 22 percent of the Bulgarian population at the time.¹⁹ This created a vacuum among the able-bodied part of the population, further crippling the industrial and agricultural production and worsening the economic situation in the country. As a result of this huge effort, the resources the Bulgarian government needed to sustain its military force were soon depleted. This was the third major factor, which had an overall effect on the outcome of the Bulgarian Army operations during World War I.²⁰

Finally, the social aspects of the Bulgarian involvement in World War I had an equally significant impact on the situation on the Macedonian Front. Even though the government and the people stood united behind the main Bulgarian foreign policy objective--national unification--they were not unanimous about the ways leading to that end.²¹ The opposition and a large part of the population did not entirely support Tsar Ferdinand's decision to join the Central Powers for a number of reasons. Primarily, Bulgaria had not yet overcome the political and economic crisis following the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 and still lacked sufficient resources to sustain its troops in another prolonged conflict shortly thereafter. In addition, public opinion was in favor of an alliance with Russia, despite the leading theme of the Russian policy on the Balkans, and towards Bulgaria in particular: "We have to prevent the creation of states powerful enough to seek hegemony on the Balkans."²² Further on in the course of the war, the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in the autumn of 1917 gave impetus to anti-war factions both inside the country and on the front lines. The large-scale mobilization, the worsening economic situation at home, and the Allies' growing antimilitary propaganda to a large extent eroded the support of the Bulgarian population for the cause and the commitment of the Soldiers in the trenches over the three years of continuous conflict.²³

These major political, military, economic, and social factors formed the strategic context that shaped the overall outcome of the events on the Macedonian Front between 1915 and 1918. However, the author of this thesis does not intend to further examine these factors, since the effect they created was equal for both areas of operations. Instead, the research will focus primarily on the commanders' capabilities at the tactical level to mitigate the negative effect of these factors in order to achieve success.

Research Question

The primary research question the author will seek to answer in this study is:

“What was the predominant factor which determined the outcome of the Bulgarian Army operations at Dobro Pole and Doiran in World War I?” In order to gather and evaluate the necessary information, draft a workable thesis statement, and support it with evidence, the author has developed several groups of secondary research questions. The first group of questions will examine the key factors that affected the outcome of the two operations and how they contributed to the Bulgarian Army failure at Dobro Pole and the success at Doiran. The factors or variables that the author will explore for the purposes of this study are mission, enemy, terrain, time, and troops available. As part of the mission variables in the United States Army doctrine, these aspects of the operational environment directly affect successful mission completion²⁴ and are applicable mainly at the tactical level of operations, which is the intended focus of this study. Since none of the available sources used in this thesis suggests that the civil considerations were a relevant factor for the outcome of the operations on the Macedonian Front during World War I, the author will not analyze them as part of the mission variables.

In order to add depth to the research, however, the author will further examine how the senior commanders on the ground were able to assess the effect of these factors on their operations. Thus, the second set of questions will seek to identify the commanders’ capabilities to understand the operational environment, visualize the desired end state of their operations, give guidance to their subordinates, and lead them in combat.²⁵

As a last factor contributing to the outcome of the two operations, the author of this thesis will look at the senior leaders' ability to lead, develop, and achieve.²⁶ Thus, as a third set of questions, the author will analyze what the leadership qualities of the senior commanders on the Macedonian Front were. Besides its relevance to the operations at Dobro Pole and Doiran, the analysis of the senior commanders' decision-making process, conduct of the operations, and leadership qualities and their applicability in the contemporary environment could provide valuable insights for the Bulgarian Army doctrine development and officers corps training.

In the autumn of 1918, the Entente forces at Salonika were in preparation for an offensive operation in Macedonia in order to defeat the Bulgarian Army, thereby eliminating the Bulgarian participation in the war. Although their commander, General Franchet d'Esperey, envisioned the attack against Dobro Pole as the decisive operation in his overall concept, he planned for another, almost equally important supporting operation, which was directed against the sector between the Vardar River and Lake Doiran (see figure 2). The general mission, given by the Bulgarian Active Army Headquarters to the units at the Macedonian Front was to persistently defend the assigned positions, shattering the enemy's advance and preventing penetration of the front.²⁷

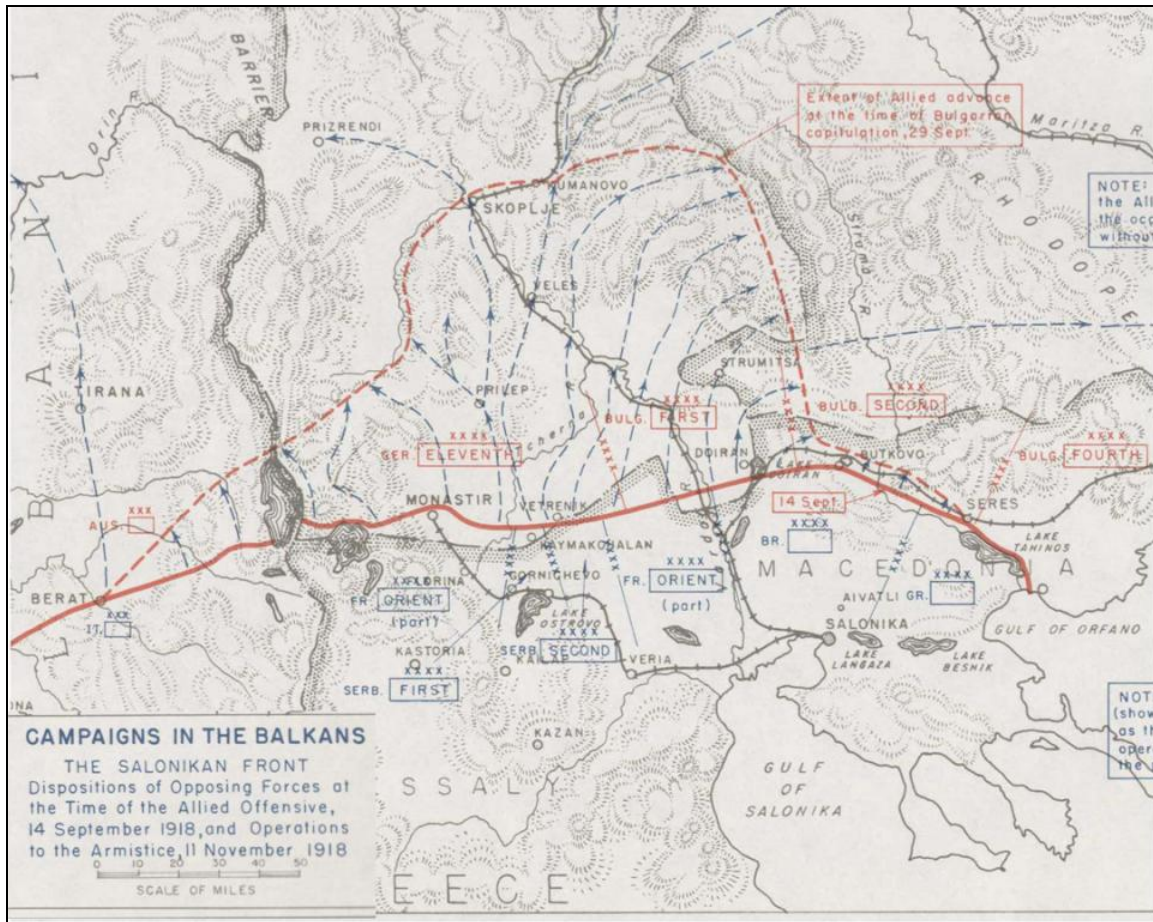


Figure 2. Operations on the Salonika Front, September-November 1918
Source: First World War, Battlefield Maps--Balkan Front, <http://www.firstworldwar.com/maps/balkanfront.htm> (accessed 30 April 2012).

Even though the troops at Dobro Pole and Doiran were facing different enemies formations, the level of training, equipment, and overall motivation of the troops were similar in the two sectors. At Dobro Pole, as his decisive operation, General d'Esperey employed the Serbian Second Army, reinforced with two additional French colonial divisions. The Serbian Army was well equipped, with relatively high troops' morale. Furthermore, the driving power for the Serbian Soldiers was the desire to reach a turning point in the war and return to their homeland, occupied by the Central Powers.²⁸ The

force ratio at the penetration sector (Sokol--Veternika) was 2.6:1 infantry battalions in favor of the Entente troops.²⁹

The Allies' shaping operation, directed against the First Bulgarian Army at Doiran, lay with the British XII and XVI Corps, supported by two Greek divisions under General George Milne's command.³⁰ General Milne's intent was to conduct a penetration in the positions of the 9th Infantry (Pleven) Division with the forces of XII British Corps commanded by Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Fuller Maitland Wilson. The corps was comprised of four regular British divisions, one Greek division, and one French regiment. Despite their prolonged stay at the Macedonian Front, in the autumn of 1918 the British troops did not lack the fighting spirit and determination to bring the allied offensive at Doiran to a successful end. A participant in the events from the 28th British Division describes the bravery, demonstrated by the Soldiers of the British Salonika Army during the unsuccessful assault against the Bulgarian positions: "Whatever Sir George Milne now thought of his own plans, he must have been gratified by the behaviour of his own troops."³¹

Even though the Greek troops were not inspired by the same notion as the Serbians who fought further west, they operated on a familiar terrain, had undergone a certain level of training, and received sufficient equipment from the Allies. In terms of figures, the overall force ratio at Doiran was 2.5:1 infantry battalions in favor of the Allies.³² These initial estimates provide an insight of the adversary's composition, disposition, and strength in the eve of the Allies' offensive on 14 September 1918. These will be further analyzed in the main part of the thesis in order to assess their effect on the different outcomes of the two operations.

Each of the belligerent armies' commanders realized the strategic importance of the defensive positions at Dobro Pole and Doiran. Either of them gave a relative advantage to the defenders, provided the defensive systems were tactically well organized. However, the degree of preparation of the positions and the level of detailed planning for the conduct of the operations in the two cases differed. According to General Alfred Dieterich, commander of the German 6th Reserve Division, all defensive positions occupied by the German-Bulgarian troops on the Macedonian Front were relatively well fortified and generally provided an advantage for the defending forces.³³ Other sources, however, suggest that the fortifications at Dobro Pole were not equipped according to the most recent directions of the Bulgarian High Headquarters on the organization of the defense, as of October 1916.³⁴

The Bulgarian Army defensive positions on the Macedonian Front were established in 1915, with no initial intent to extensively fortify and develop them in depth. The protracted duration of the campaign, however, suggested that in order to ensure long-term success against the continuously increasing Entente troops' strength in Salonika, the Bulgarian and German commanders had to take the necessary measures to prevent Allies' access further north. The commanders of the sectors at Dobro Pole and Doiran made different use of the three-year period during which they occupied their defensive positions. Even though the troops at Doiran were exposed more frequently to the harassing artillery fire and the Salonika Army's attempts to penetrate the front between the Vardar River and Lake Doiran, the commanders there took better advantage of the periods of relatively low-intensity fighting. By September 1918, the Bulgarian

Army positions at Doiran were better fortified and more efficiently organized than those at Dobro Pole.

Furthermore, the commander at Doiran, General Vazov, in anticipation of the Allies offensive in 1918, reorganized his division's positions in order to add depth to the defense, increase the force ratio in his favor, and establish a strong, mobile reserve for decisive counterattacks. Impressed by the high level of preparation of the defense at Doiran, the commander-in-chief of the Allied troops in Salonika, General Franchet d'Esperey, made a remark while passing through the Bulgarian positions after the end of the battle: "A formidable organization; now I am clear about the reason for the British failure here."³⁵

As in any military operation, the human factor was one of the most important aspects of the Balkans operational environment as well. Therefore, another major area of analysis of the causes for the Entente's success at Dobro Pole and defeat at Doiran will be the overall strength, composition, and fighting spirit of the Soldiers at either of the sectors. In addition, in order to assess the leadership qualities of the senior commanders, the author of the thesis will look at the level of morale and commitment of the troops, the efficiency of training and preparation for operations, and the degree of cohesion of the units achieved by their commanders.

The troops in both areas of operations had gained significant combat experience by 1918. They shared the same equipment, received similar training prior to their deployment, and had access to the same supplies. All of these, however, had significantly decreased towards the end of the war. In addition, the three-year dwelling in the trenches had its negative impact on the troops' fighting spirit, just like their adversaries across the

no man's land. Nevertheless, due to his persistence and influence as a commander, General Vazov succeeded in providing additional clothing for the Soldiers, maintaining and even improving the level of training of his troops, and better organizing the flow of supplies for his division. The concern of the division commander for his subordinates' well-being further enhanced their commitment and contributed to the success of the operation. As General Nikola Nedev, a battery commander in 9th Division at that time, recalls: "The high spirit of the troops was maintained persistently by the lowest level commanders through the highest ranking officers."³⁶

All of the senior commanders at Dobro Pole and Doiran had an extensive combat experience gained during the three wars that Bulgaria fought in its recent history prior to World War I. They had the will and determination to bring the Macedonian campaign to a successful end. However, their approach to planning and preparation of the operations and organization of their units' defensive positions significantly differed. The structure of the chain of command above division level was not similar either. The Bulgarian divisions at Dobro Pole were subordinate to the German LXI Corps under the overall command of the German Eleventh Army, while the 9th Division was directly subordinate to the Bulgarian command of the First Army. Even though the German *OHL* tried to introduce similar organization with German corps headquarters in the First Army, the Bulgarian commanders at Doiran, General Vazov in particular, were not inclined to accept such a change. In his opinion, these additional command and control elements would only break the cohesion of the army and affect negatively the troops' morale and fighting spirit.

However, the focus of the author of this thesis in the leadership analysis will be the amount of effort that the commanders in the two areas of operations put into the development of their subordinates and the achievement of high level of commitment of their troops. This part of the study will examine the ability of the Bulgarian senior leadership to create positive environment in their organizations and build cohesive units, provide freedom of action for their subordinate commanders, and increase the confidence of the Soldiers in their leaders' capabilities. Thus, the final part of the analysis of each operation will identify the core leadership competencies of the commanders at Dobro Pole and Doiran and assess how they contributed to the outcome of the operations.

In the final analysis, this thesis will assess the implications of the resulting findings on the contemporary Bulgarian Army. To this end, the author will analyze what lessons are applicable today and what areas of further research can contribute to the Bulgarian Army training and organizational leaders' development. These constitute the fourth set of secondary research questions.

Thesis Statement

The initial research suggests the following thesis statement: The main factors that influenced the outcome of the Bulgarian Army operations on the Macedonian Front in September 1918 were the organization and preparation of the defense, the level of commitment and morale of the troops, and the senior commanders' leadership and tactical skills. However, the key factor that determined the Bulgarian troops' success at Doiran as opposed to their defeat at Dobro Pole, was General Vladimir Vazov's ability to inspire and motivate the Soldiers in his organization, provide freedom of action and

encourage his subordinate leaders' initiative, and assess and develop the situation in a timely manner to achieve mission success.

Thesis Organization

The main body of this thesis is comprised of two major parts. Each of these parts will examine the conditions that affected the outcome of the operations at Dobro Pole and Doiran, respectively. To validate the tentative thesis that the senior Bulgarian commanders' leadership, namely General Vazov's leader competencies, was the major contributor to the successful outcome of the defensive operation at Doiran, the author will apply a controlled comparison study.³⁷

As already explained, the variables, which this author will employ for the purposes of the study are mission, enemy, terrain, troops, and time available. These comprise the controlled independent variables, which will be used to explain the outcome of the two case studies: failure and success in defensive operations. The variable, which will vary across the cases to be compared, is the commander's leadership. Leadership is defined as the process of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation while operating to accomplish the mission and improving the organization.³⁸ The author's intent is to use the core leader competencies of lead, develop, and achieve to describe variance in commanders' leadership as an independent variable to discover the cause and effect relationship between it and the outcome of the two operations. His primary point of reference, therefore, will be the US Army Field Manual FM 6-22 *Army Leadership* as a conceptual framework for organizational leadership analysis, which is applicable to different historical contexts and organizations. In addition, in order to conduct a comprehensive assessment of all the factors, the author will examine the role of

the commanders in the operations process and their ability to understand the operational environment, visualize the desired end state of their operations, give guidance to their subordinates, and lead them in combat, while constantly assessing the development of the situation. To that end, the author will use the US Army Field Manual FM 6-0 *Mission Command*.

On a final note, the author of this thesis will suggest the lessons identified during the course of the research in an attempt to provide a base for further analysis of the reasons that influenced the outcome of the Bulgarian Army operations at Dobro Pole and Doiran. In addition, the analysis of the leader competencies of the Bulgarian senior commanders as a contributing factor for the outcome of the Bulgarian Army operations at the Macedonian Front, will provide valuable insights of their applicability in the contemporary operational environment.

¹Richard C. Hall, *Balkan Breakthrough* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), xiv.

²Dimitur Zafirov, "Otbranata pri Doiran," *Voenno-istoricheski sbornik* (Book 1 2004): 5.

³Hall, *Balkan Breakthrough*, 24-26.

⁴Stefan Noikov, *Zashto ne pobedihme* (Sofia: Armeiski voenno-izdatelski kompleks, 1922), 21.

⁵*Ibid.*, 26.

⁶Rakovski Defense and Staff College (RDSC), "Uchastie na Bulgariya v Purvata Svetovna Voina (1915-1918)," http://rdsc.md.government.bg/BG/About/VoennaIstoria/3_07.php (accessed 28 April 2012).

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸Hall, *Balkan Breakthrough*, 45.

⁹RDSC, "Uchastie na Bulgariya v Purvata Svetovna Voina (1915-1918)."

- ¹⁰Hall, *Balkan Breakthrough*, 46.
- ¹¹Noikov, *Zashto ne pobedihme*, 74.
- ¹²Ivan Ilchev, *Bulgariya i Antantata prez Purvata Svetovna Voina* (Sofia: Nauka i Izkustvo, 1990), 216.
- ¹³Stefan Toshev, *Pobedeni bez da budem biti* (Sofia: Stopansko razvitie, 1924), 20.
- ¹⁴Marko Andreev, “Kum Dobro pole prez 1916,” *Voenno-istoricheski sbornik*, (Book 1 1931): 91-92.
- ¹⁵The Serbian-Bulgarian War (1885), the First Balkan War (1912), and the Second Balkan War (1913).
- ¹⁶Toshev, *Pobedeni bez da budem biti*, 28.
- ¹⁷Noikov, *Zashto ne pobedihme*, 4. Azmanov provides further assessment of the situation on the Western Front and in the Balkans in September 1918 and the worsening conditions for the Central Powers. See Dimitur Azmanov, *Urocut ot Dobro pole* (Sofia: Knipegraf, 1985), 9-12.
- ¹⁸Philip J. Haythornthwaite, *The World War One Sourcebook* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1992), 157.
- ¹⁹John Ellis and Michael Cox, *The World War One Databook* (London: Aurum Press, 2001), 245.
- ²⁰Azmanov, *Urocut ot Dobro pole*, 18.
- ²¹Noikov, *Zashto ne pobedihme*, 19-20.
- ²²Ilchev, *Bulgariya i Antantata prez Pyrvata Svetovna Voina*, 228.
- ²³*Ibid.*, 257.
- ²⁴Department of the Army, FM 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, February 2008), 1-9.
- ²⁵Department of the Army, FM 6-0, *Mission Command* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, September 2011), 2-1--2-6.
- ²⁶Department of the Army, FM 6-22, *Military Leadership* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, October 2006), 11-1--11-11.
- ²⁷Noikov, *Zashto ne pobedihme*, 143.

²⁸Stojan Jovic, Zivorad Atanskovic, *Bitke i bojevi: istocna Srbija, juzna Srbija, Kosovo, 1804-1944* (Nish: Gradina, 1983), 131.

²⁹Noikov, *Zashto ne pobedihme*, 177.

³⁰Alan Palmer, "Defeat of Bulgaria: The Central Powers Begin to Crack." In *The Marshal Cavendish Illustrated Encyclopedia of World War I*, 1918-19, ed. Peter Young (Freeport, NY: Marshall Cavendish Corp, 1984), 2989.

³¹Famili Memorabilia, "Salonika and Macedonia 1916-1918," http://memorabilia.homestead.com/files/Salonika_and_Macedonia_1916_18.htm (accessed 6 April 2012).

³²Asen Karaivanov, "Otbranata na Doiranskata poziciya prez esenta na 1918," *Voenno-istoricheski sbornik* (Book 2 1988): 124.

³³Alfred Dieterich, "Krayat na svetovната voina na Makedonskiya front," *Voenno-istoricheski sbornik* (Books 3 and 4 1927), 22.

³⁴Noikov, *Zashto ne pobedihme*, 169-173.

³⁵Karaivanov, *Otbranata na Doiranskata poziciya prez esenta na 1918*, 138.

³⁶Nikola Nedev, *Doiranskata epopeya* (Sofia: Armeiski voenno-izdatelski fond, 1923), 240.

³⁷Paul G. Lauren, *Diplomacy—New Approaches in History, Theory, and Policy* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 54-55.

³⁸Department of the Army, FM 6-22, *Military Leadership*, 1-2.

CHAPTER 2

THE BREAKTHROUGH AT DOBRO POLE

Introduction

While . . . the tragedy at the Dobro Pole position was taking place and the scattered sections, platoons, companies, and battalions, at the most, were fighting a life-and-death struggle, the higher headquarters and commanders (of regiments, brigades, divisions, and armies) were content with sending the weak reserves they had on their disposal in support [of those troops]. After that, they were not commanding; they got lost in the chaos that set in after the fall of the main position. What they were supposed to do was, with their presence at the most threatened and dangerous areas, to give courage to the downhearted and set an example of self-sacrifice. In such situations, the great personalities and real leaders manifest themselves Unfortunately, we have to admit that the high commanding ranks demonstrated such a valor in a very few occasions and did not employ themselves . . . “as a last reserve.”

— Col Dimitur Azmanov, *Urocut ot Dobro Pole*

The Bulgarian High Command was aware of the major offensive operation planned by the Entente against the Central Powers on the Macedonian Front in the autumn of 1918. Furthermore, they anticipated that Dobro Pole would be the primary objective of this operation. The Bulgarian Active Army Headquarters' bulletin, dated 1 September 1918 reads: “On the Macedonian Front we are in the eve of an increased enemy activity, primarily in the Serbian positions. Only the future will show whether this activity will take the form of limited attacks in order to seize the Dobro Pole--Veternik ridge or a penetration towards Prilep as an objective.”¹ Even though there was enough evidence for the Allies' pending offensive, little had been done by both the Bulgarian and German commands to reinforce the second line of defense at the Dobro Pole position, concentrate sufficient reserves, or improve the command and control of the 2nd and 3rd Infantry Divisions to ensure unity of effort at the anticipated sector of the allied attack.

Mission

Higher Headquarters' Plans

Following the Allies' attempts in the autumn of 1916 to conduct a penetration of the Macedonian Front up the Vardar valley to the east and at the Cherna river bend to the west, the Bulgarian High Command had realized the strategic importance of Dobro Pole as key to the entire Bulgarian position in Macedonia. Despite this fact, little was done to develop an operational plan for the defense of this sector as part of an overall strategy. Furthermore, the efforts of the Bulgarian and German commands were concentrated on a separate sectors of the Macedonian Front--Doiran, Dobro Pole, and west of Bitola (Monastir)--which remained to a large extent isolated during the course of the campaign. Due to the lack of a plan at an army group and higher levels for the shift of resources across the front between these sectors, the risk of a successful allied offensive against either of them before the Central Powers could respond effectively and in a timely manner, was relatively high.²

In 1918, due to the insufficient number of units for such a vast front, the decreasing level of the troops' morale, and the inadequate supplies, the Bulgarian High Command directed its subordinate armies to implement a completely passive defensive approach, holding their positions to the last resort, defeating every enemy offensive attempt. Thus, the Central Powers on the Macedonian Front entirely left the initiative to the Entente Salonika Army, providing the Allies' commanders with freedom of maneuver and opportunity to regroup their units and concentrate combat power in the desired sector, without significant disruption on behalf of the Bulgarian Army.³

In the autumn of 1918, the Eleventh Army was defending the front between the Albanian border and Kojuh Mountain (Malarupa), denying enemy access along the axes Bitola--Prilep and Moglena--Kavadarci, towards the Vardar River (see figure 3).⁴ The LXI Corps, with the 2nd (Thracian) Division was defending the western flank of the Dobro Pole position. The 3rd (Balkan) Division, which was under Eleventh Army direct command, occupied positions between the Dobro Pole River and Malarupa.⁵

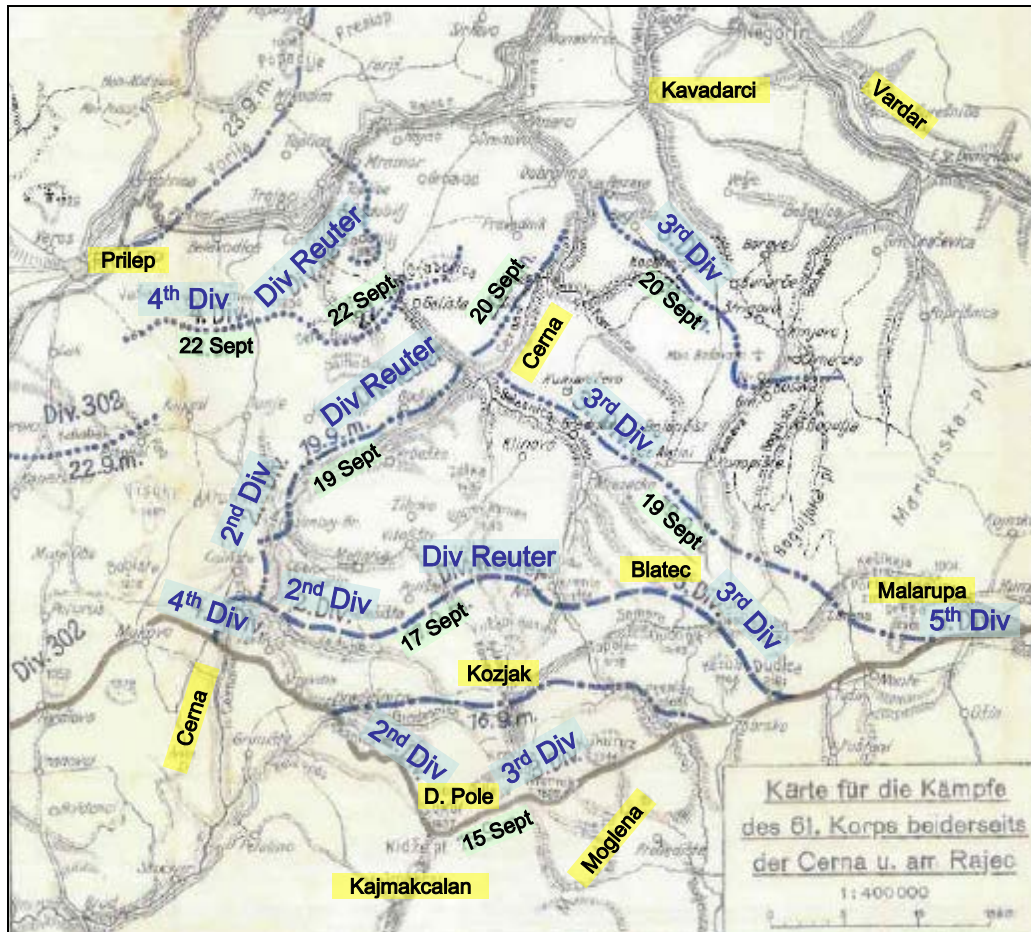


Figure 3. The LXI Corps Operations in September 1918
Source: Dieterich, *Weltkriegsende an der Mazedonischen Front* (Berlin: Druck und Verlag von Gerhard Stalling, 1926).

Analysis of the Mission and Operations Planning

The strategic importance of Dobro Pole was determined by its location. This defensive position was the only one, besides Doiran that blocked the Allies' access to the Vardar valley and the railway used to supply the entire First Army and elements of the Eleventh Army. Lieutenant Colonel Marko Andreev, commander of the 32nd Infantry (Zagora) Regiment of the 3rd Infantry Division provided an assessment of the increased importance of the defense of Dobro Pole after 1916.

If we consider the type of terrain and the availability of lines of communication in the sector Mount Blatec--Dobro Pole . . . which we had to assume the Serbs were familiar with, due to the fact that they have been the rulers of Macedonia since 1913, it would not be hard to make an estimate of the importance of this segment of the Southern Front and the significance of the mistake we were making by not paying the necessary attention to it, not fortifying it, and not occupying it appropriately.⁶

In his assessment, Colonel Andreev insisted that the British and French troops would most likely try to avoid the strongest part of the Bulgarian defense, the sector between Malarupa and Doiran stretching across the Vardar River. He envisioned, instead, that the Entente commanders would probably try to bypass these fortified positions by outflanking the troops occupying them along a secondary avenue of approach along the axis Mount Blatec--Kavadarci (see figure 3). Nevertheless, such an approach was not adopted by the senior leadership until the last days of August 1918, when the Allies' offensive was imminent and little could be done to mitigate the deficiencies of the defensive system at that stage. Thus, the Allies' breakthrough of the Macedonian Front in September 1918 was to a large extent a consequence of the incomplete initial appreciation of the strategic importance of the Dobro Pole position by both the German Army Group Command and the Bulgarian High Command.⁷

The lack of complete situational understanding among the majority of the Bulgarian senior leaders, the passive defense strategy adopted by both the German and Bulgarian commands, and the lack of initiative among some of the Bulgarian division commanders together resulted in the insufficient preparation of the defensive positions at Dobro Pole. Lieutenant Colonel Boyan Stanchev⁸ described the situation from the perspective of the 30th Infantry (Sheinovo) Regiment, defending Dobro Pole from October 1917 until the end of the war: “For two years, no general plan has been developed for the reinforcement of this important position; that was something taken into consideration only on the eve of the enemy offensive.”⁹ Thus, the defensive preparations were primarily conducted under the junior commanders’ directions. They were not part of a larger defensive plan, nested in the concept of 2nd Division commander, nor were they coordinated with the defensive plans of 3rd Division.

The inappropriate organization of the artillery support of the Dobro Pole sector also contributed to the Entente success there. The eastern artillery group of the 2nd Infantry Division had to provide fire support along a 22-kilometer frontage to the two brigades defending against the Allies’ main effort: 1st Brigade of the 8th Infantry Division (1-8 Brigade), which was under the operational command of the 2nd Division, and the 2nd Brigade of the 3rd Infantry Division (2-3 Brigade). Instead of allocating the available mountain batteries from the less critical sectors of the front to Dobro Pole, the Bulgarian High Command relied solely on the above mentioned artillery group with a total of 30 guns to fight the Allies’ 150 guns in this sector of the defense.¹⁰

Another significant shortfall in the planning and preparation of the defensive operation by the Bulgarian and German commands was the inappropriate allocation of

the reserves. According to General Stefan Toshev, Commanding Officer of the Third and Forth Bulgarian Armies during the war, the major reasons for the Allies' quick success at Dobro Pole were the lack of planning and preparation of a decisive counterattack in this sector, the insufficient augmentations dedicated to this part of the front, and the allocation of Eleventh Army's reserve units away from the endangered sector.¹¹ Furthermore, these reserves were launched in the battle piecemeal, thereby achieving little to no effect on the overall outcome of the operation. General Dieterich confirms General Toshev's assessment: "There were no forces of sufficient strength, which could be massed to either block the breakthrough or counterattack the enemy's flanks in order to change the situation."¹²

Enemy

Composition, Disposition, and Strength

In the eve of the Allies' offensive, General d'Esperey had at his disposal a total of 75 battalions (40,000 troops) and 570 guns and howitzers¹³ for his attack against the defensive sector between the Cerna and Moglenica Rivers.¹⁴ The Entente batteries were located at dominating positions, which allowed them to reach with artillery fire both the first and second lines of the Bulgarian defense without changing their firing positions. The allied troops' strength in the direction of the main effort against Sokol--Veternik was 48 battalions and the majority of the artillery pieces (approximately 420 guns and howitzers).¹⁵

The Bulgarian units at Dobro Pole had been fighting against the Serbian troops since August 1916. Even though there was a strong sense of animosity among the Bulgarian troops against the Serbians, they were never underestimated as an adversary

and were treated with respect and dignity.¹⁶ The Serbian troops had an excellent knowledge of the terrain in the area of the operation, good training and preparation for mountain warfare, and sufficient equipment.¹⁷ It was not until the eve of the offensive in 1918 that General d'Esperey reinforced the Serbian Army with two French colonial divisions. Nevertheless, these augmentations did not achieve any effect of surprise on the defenders at Dobro Pole, since the Bulgarian command already had information about their possible employment.¹⁸

Assessment of Enemy Capabilities and Intent

Prior to the offensive on 14 September 1918, the Allied forces at Salonika had been concentrating combat power, primarily artillery pieces, at the dominating heights south of Dobro Pole for two months. General d'Esperey decided to conduct his decisive operation against the defensive positions of the Eleventh Army between the Cerna River and the Moglenica River. His main effort lay with the Serbian Second Army with the task to conduct a penetration of the Bulgarian positions at the nine-kilometer sector between the Mounts Sokol and Veternik. The Second Serbian Army was to execute the attack with its Sumadija Division and two French colonial divisions--the 122nd and 17th--in the first echelon as the penetration force and the Timok and Yugoslav Divisions in the second echelon as the exploitation force (see figure 4).

The total strength of the 1-8 and 2-3 Brigades was 18 infantry battalions, which made the force ratio at Dobro Pole 2.6:1 infantry battalions in favor of the Allies.¹⁹ In the sector of the main effort between Sokol and Veternik, this proportion reached 3:1.²⁰ The greatest advantage of the Entente, however, was the number and caliber of their artillery pieces. The total number of guns supporting the 2nd and 3rd Infantry Divisions defensive

operations was 152²¹ (3.7:1 in favor of the attacking troops), while those positioned against the Entente main effort between Sokol and Veternik counted 48 guns and 42 howitzers (4.6:1).²² The Bulgarian lack of effective indirect fire support contributed to the Allies' success at Dobro Pole, as Colonel Stanchev described it "in the decisive moment, our artillery was weak and unable to support the infantry, let alone conduct counter-battery fight against the enemy artillery."²³

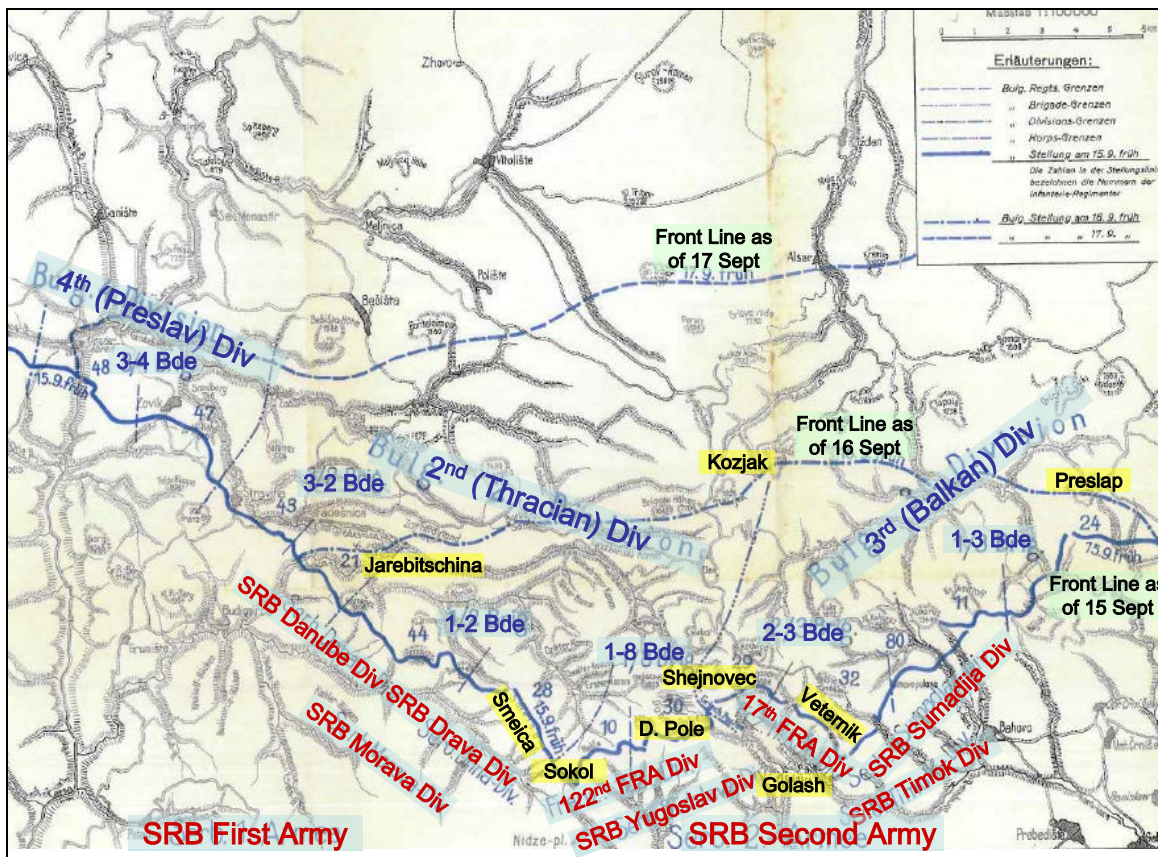


Figure 4. Development of the Allies' Offensive 14-17 September 1918
(The Breakthrough Front)

Source: Dieterich, *Weltkriegsende an der Mazedonischen Front* (Berlin: Druck und Verlag von Gerhard Stalling, 1926).

Terrain

Terrain Effects on the Operations

Dobro Pole was a rugged 1,800-meter high ridge, covering a frontage of roughly nine kilometers between the Mounts Sokol and Veternik. The two mountains were the key positions of the Bulgarian first line of defense. About five kilometers further north lay the second line of defense along the slopes of the Kozjak Mountain. In case of enemy penetration of the first defensive line, the northern ridge provided an excellent opportunity to effectively block the enemy's access to the north, thereby containing his exploitation efforts. In order to achieve this effect, however, the position needed to be well fortified and supported by artillery fire. However, in the case of Dobro Pole almost the entire fortification system was organized in one echelon, instead of being developed in depth as the mountainous terrain dictated.²⁴

The characteristics of the terrain at Dobro Pole created favorable conditions for the defenders and provided them with significant advantage over the attacking Entente troops: a severely restricted sector, with parallel ridges stretching from west to east in depth of the position, locked between the Cerna and Vardar Rivers. In his monograph, however, General Dieterich admits that the Army Group Scholtz Command did not reinforce the natural terrain features with engineer fortifications. Scarce obstacles and trenches existed only on the positions at Mount Kozjak.²⁵ This overreliance on the difficult terrain of Dobro Pole, reaffirmed by the Bulgarian defensive success during the Allies spring offensive in 1918, negatively influenced the decisions of the senior leaders at the time of the breakthrough later the same year.

Despite the restricted terrain that protected it from the adversary's infantry attacks, the Dobro Pole position had significant disadvantages, given the location of the main defensive line. As of 21 October 1916, the 32nd Infantry Regiment was defending the sector the Greek Post--Sokol--Smeica.²⁶ The rear area of the position provided no concealment; therefore, undetected movement during daytime was impossible, due to the fact that the Serbian troops to the south were located on dominating positions. This made sustainment during combat extremely difficult, since the only supply route, all the way up to Kozjak, was exposed to enemy fire.²⁷ In addition, the terrain features severely restricted the deployment of the defenders' artillery systems, thereby impeding the effective use of indirect fire. The regimental commander, Colonel Andreev, recommended in a report to his brigade commander that the main defensive position should be established further north, along the line Mount Schejnovec--Stojanova-height--Smeica, which would stand much greater chance for success. His recommendations, however, were never taken into consideration.²⁸

Assessment of the Terrain and Organization of the Defense

The inadequate assessment of the terrain and its effects on the operations by both the German and Bulgarian High Commands and the senior commanders on the ground in the early phases of the campaign resulted in a series of tactical mistakes, which facilitated the French-Serbian offensive against Dobro Pole in 1918. In the spring of 1916, 2-3 Brigade occupied what would later become the breakthrough sector. The division commander, General Nikola Ribarov faced the dilemma of either fortifying the line Mount Sokol--Dobro Pole--Kozjak--Blatec as his main defensive position, or dedicating sufficient manpower to retain control of the forward positions Pojarski Ridge--Kukuruz--

Preslap. Neither he, nor the 2-3 Brigade commander, Colonel Boshnakov, made a timely decision that would solve this issue, which allowed the Serbian troops to occupy one of the most important pieces of key terrain in this sector--Mount Golash.²⁹ When the commander of the 29th Infantry (Yambol) Regiment, defending the eastern part of Dobro Pole finally received the order to seize Golash, he was unable to accomplish the mission, since Serbian forces of significant strength had already occupied it.³⁰

Colonel Andreev, the commander of the 32nd Regiment of the 2-3 Brigade, occupying the defensive positions to the east of 29th Regiment, made an assessment the consequences of the flaws in the commanders' decision-making process, which led to the loss of key terrain and significantly decreased the favorable conditions that Dobro Pole provided to the defenders. He wrote in his book: "Across it [Golash] on 15 September [1918] the 17th Colonial French Division launched its offensive, seized Mount Schejnovec without any significant difficulties, cut the route Dobro Pole--Kozjak, and facilitated the seizure of Dobro Pole by the 122nd French Division."³¹ Furthermore, by placing their 155-mm and 105-mm guns on the commanding heights of Pojarski Ridge and Mount Golash, which dominated Dobro Pole, the Allies were able to target the defending troops with frontal, flanking, and deep fires.³²

In October 1917, the 2nd Infantry (Thracian) Division assumed operational command over 1-8 Brigade, which occupied the Dobro Pole sector at that time. The brigade had its 10th Infantry (Rodopa) Regiment on the western flank and the 30th Infantry (Sheinovo) Regiment on the eastern flank of the defense, which included the Dobro Pole position. Further east of 30th Regiment were the positions of the 29th Infantry (Yambol) Regiment of the 2-3 Infantry Brigade (see figure 4). As in 1916, the

main defensive line was still running along the southern ridge of Dobro Pole. No defensive positions were established on the northern ridge, which provided much more favorable conditions for the defending troops to contain the enemy attacks. Just as Colonel Andreev predicted, the failure of the Army Group Command and the two division commanders to assess the advantages of the line Stojanova-height--Schejnovec and reinforce it, either as a main or secondary line of defense, had catastrophic consequences for the entire Bulgarian defense. Colonel Stanchev further described the deficiencies of the defensive system: “The fortifications were established only along the forward heights; further north, the mountain ridges and mounts, magnificent blocking positions, were not fortified.”³³

Another significant flaw in the planning and organization of the defense by the Army Group Command was the inappropriate establishment of the boundary line between the 2nd and the 3rd Divisions. Instead of assigning the key commanding heights of Kanarite, Stojanova, Greek Post, and Schejnovec to either of the divisions in order to develop integrated defense in depth, they were split between the two. Thus, neither the 30th nor the 29th Regiments took full advantage of the characteristics of the terrain at Dobro Pole. Neither of the division commanders, however, requested their higher commands to change the boundary lines. Thus, coordination of the defensive operations in one of the crucial sectors of the Macedonian Front was difficult to achieve.

Finally, as result of the ineffective organization and control of the sustainment at regimental and division levels, the troops at Dobro Pole lacked sufficient supplies, adequate maintenance of the equipment, and good field services. There was only one main supply route, running parallel to the front line within the entire 2nd Division's area

of operations. Even though the route was an easy enemy target, no additional efforts were made by the division command to build alternative routes towards the forward positions during the two-year period in which the division occupied the defensive positions.³⁴

Troops

Composition, Strength, and Level of Training

In September 1918, four infantry regiments defended the Dobro Pole position and the key terrain to its flanks (Sokol to the west and Veternik to the east). The 1-8 Brigade assumed responsibility over the western sector of the defense with its 10th and 30th Regiments in May 1917, after having spent nearly six months away from the front lines, replacing their combat losses and conducting training and integration. The brigade replaced the 32nd and 29th Regiments of the 2-3 Brigade, which had been in combat since 1916 at the Dobro Pole position. Later the same year, however, the 2-3 Brigade was committed again to defend the eastern part of the same sector.³⁵ With short interruptions, both brigades had been in contact with the allied troops, primarily Serbian, at this segment of the Macedonian Front for almost two and a half years. Thus, they were familiar with the positions they had to defend and the enemy they were to fight.

At the time of the Allies' offensive, the breakthrough sector was defended by the 30th Infantry (Sheinovo) Regiment, the overall personnel strength of which was at 60 percent as a result of the 1917 Allies' operations against Dobro Pole. As most of the Bulgarian units on the Macedonian Front, the 30th Regiment troops had gained significant combat experience during the course of the war. Following the Entente offensive in 1916, however, the regiment suffered heavy casualties. At the end of October 1916, the regiment was withdrawn from the front line for replacement of the combat

losses, reintegration, and training.³⁶ Even though the new recruits were comprised of young, not fully experienced Soldiers, when the regiment took over the defense of Dobro Pole, they were already war-hardened in combat operations during the summer of 1917. Furthermore, the regimental traditions passed by the veterans on to the new recruits, the combat experience from the earlier engagements, and the efforts of the line officers to improve the morale of their troops by scheduling leaves for all the personnel, maintained the combat spirit within the 30th Regiment at an adequate level. This became evident in May 1918, when the troops at Dobro Pole successfully defeated the Allies' spring offensive.³⁷

In the eve of the battle, the 29th and the 32nd Infantry Regiments had suffered between 14 and 18 percent combat losses.³⁸ The regiments, as well as the rest of the units of the 2nd and the 3rd Divisions had received an adequate level of preparation prior to the their deployment, which was further solidified in the course of the battles. Among other drills, the troops in the trenches were trained to counter the employment of chemical ammunition by the Allies, in which the defenders became very proficient.³⁹ However, the level of training in other areas, like communications, was not sufficient. On 14 September 1918, the first line of defense at Dobro Pole remained isolated for 12 hours, without communications due to the heavy artillery fire.⁴⁰

Along the front of the Allies' offensive between the Rivers Lesnica and Peternishka, which was roughly 21 kilometers, the 2nd and 3rd Infantry Divisions had deployed a total of 25 battalions. Thus, each of the battalions had a frontage of 0.8 kilometers to cover. At the breakthrough sector, the 1-8 and 2-3 Brigades had 18 battalions, which created a density of one battalion per each 0.5 kilometers of the front.⁴¹

Morale and Cohesion

In the eve of the Allied offensive, the German command of the Army Group von Scholtz was confident in the fighting spirit, determination, and perseverance of the Bulgarian Soldier, especially when fighting in mountainous terrain. Their assessment, however, omitted several facts. The lack of effective support by their German allies undermined the belief of the troops in their ultimate success. Furthermore, similar to the rest of the Bulgarian units at the Macedonian Front in 1918, the level of sustainment of the two divisions at Dobro Pole was also insufficient, primarily in terms of food supplies and clothing. In addition, the war-weariness and the monotony of life in the trenches instilled a sense of apathy even in the most dedicated Soldiers.⁴²

The cumulative effect of these factors and the perspective of another winter in the trenches rapidly decreased the overall commitment of the troops on the Macedonian Front towards the autumn of 1918. The harsh conditions in the mountains, combined with the lack of supplies, and the increasing Allies' propaganda resulted in the first cases of desertion among some of the units of the 2nd Infantry Division.⁴³ To add to the effect, due to the high number of casualties among the platoon and company commanders after the initial engagements on the 14 and 15 September 1918, a large portion of the Bulgarian units remained without effective chain of command at this stage of the battle. By the evening of the second day of the fighting, the 29th Infantry (Yambol) Regiment had combat losses of 25 officers and 1149 non-commissioned officers and lower enlisted, while the 30th Infantry (Schejnovovo) Regiment--15 and 1,500, respectively.⁴⁴ The loss of the first line of defense and the lack of viable support, coupled with the absence of officers in the ranks, drove some of the Soldiers into leaving their units, heading back

home. However, the troops that remained with their units were determined to fight until the end and come out of the war with honor.⁴⁵

Despite those negative factors, the defending units fought ferociously, especially in the initial days of the offensive. At Dobro Pole, the 17th French Colonial Division had to repel five Bulgarian counterattacks. On the Kozjak Mountain, the Bulgarians threw back attack after attack until the early evening of 16 September.⁴⁶ Evidence of a morale crisis was difficult to find in the performance of the Bulgarian troops in the first days of the fighting.⁴⁷ In his book, Colonel Stanchev, as a direct participant in the events, describes numerous cases of exemplary leadership of the platoon and company commanders and personal courage and bravery of the Soldiers of the 30th Infantry Regiment during the fighting on 14 and 15 September.

Furthermore, the performance of the defenders of Dobro Pole gained their adversaries' respect as well. Colonel Kalafatovich, Chief of Operations of the Serbian Army High Headquarters during World War I, gave an assessment of the fighting of the Bulgarians at Dobro Pole during the Allies' 1918 offensive: "The Bulgarian troops at the first line positions fulfilled their duty with honor and rendered a longer and more tenacious resistance [than we anticipated]; they did all a human can do."⁴⁸

Time

At the end of 1915, the Bulgarian Army units were deployed along the Greek border following the successful offensive against Serbia in preparation of their defensive positions. The 3rd Infantry (Balkan) Division, under the command of General Nikola Ribarov, occupied the sector between the Cerna River and Malarupa in March 1916, replacing the 9th (Pleven) Division. However, the 3rd Division had yet to reconnoiter the

terrain and establish their defensive lines. On the other hand, it was to their advantage that there were no enemy troops of significant strength at this part of the front at that time, which would disrupt their fortification works. The first allied troops did not appear until the end of June with the initial engagements beginning at the end of July.⁴⁹

Even though the major operations of the Entente against the positions at Dobro Pole started as early as mid-August, the division command did not take full advantage of the temporary lull in the fight to concentrate the efforts of its subordinate units on developing well fortified defensive positions. Thus, over the next two years, the troops at Dobro Pole, similarly to those at Doiran, had to continue the fortification activities under the threat of the Allies' artillery fire, using the short periods when they were not engaged with the enemy.

In October 1917, the 2nd Infantry (Thracian) Division, commanded by General Hristo Burmov, assumed command of the 1-8 Brigade, thereby taking responsibility of the western flank of the Dobro Pole position. General Burmov had strong confidence in his troops' capabilities and the inaccessibility of the terrain at this sector, which not only kept the defense vulnerable, but also led him to ill-judged decisions at the time of the breakthrough in 1918 as the Active Army Chief of Staff. Therefore, it was not until August 1918 when a systematic development of the positions in depth was initiated under the directions of the new commanding officer of the 2nd Division, General Ivan Rusev.⁵⁰ However, he lacked both the time and resources to significantly improve the defense of Dobro Pole prior to the Entente offensive in September of the same year.

Leadership

Commanders' Qualities

By 1918, due to the German units' withdrawal to the Western Front, the Bulgarian Army had to defend an ever-extending front with its constantly depleting resources. In order to cover the Macedonian Front, the Bulgarian High Command subdivided the existing tactical units: it formed 88 infantry regiments out of 40 and 27 artillery regiments out of 10. The consequences were two-fold: on one hand, the defensive lines were overextended and lacked depth and on the other, most of the better-trained company and battery commanders were assigned to higher positions at regimental level. This created a deficiency of experienced officers in the junior commanders' ranks in the course of the campaign and degraded the effectiveness of the chain of command at the tactical level.⁵¹ However, the majority of the junior officers were dedicated to the cause, making significant efforts to maintain the morale, discipline, and commitment of the troops.⁵²

The senior Bulgarian leadership faced significant challenges, too. On the eve of the Allies' offensive, the Commander-in-Chief of the Bulgarian Army, General Zhekov, had to leave for Vienna for an urgent medical treatment. His deputy, General Georgi Todorov, was the acting commander during the final stage of the campaign on the Macedonian Front. Despite his impressive combat experience, gained during the War of Liberation, the Serbian-Bulgarian War, and the Balkan Wars and his successful performance as Commander of the Second and Third Armies between 1915 and 1918, General Todorov failed to appreciate the significance of the situation and the scale of his responsibility as commander of the entire Macedonian Front.

General Todorov's personal presence and example at the front lines after the initial success of the Serbian and the French troops at Dobro Pole had a positive impact on the withdrawing troops and some of the commanders on the ground and contributed to his understanding of the situation at the breakthrough sector. However, by narrowing his focus to a specific area of the front, he denied himself the ability to synchronize the efforts of all the resources on his disposal in order to achieve success across the entire front of the defense. Furthermore, due to the inefficient communications, General Todorov was neither able to provide guidance to his staff nor give direction to his subordinate commanders in a timely manner. Colonel Azmanov described the situation at the breakthrough sector: "On the next day [17 September], he [General Todorov] was lost in the chaos of the retreating [troops] and, as his attention was distracted by them, he was no longer commanding the entire army, he was just reassuring those he saw in front of him."⁵³

Similarly, the acting Active Army Chief of Staff, General Hristo Burmov, who was recently appointed to the position, also failed to develop a comprehensive situational understanding and adequately direct the actions of the Bulgarian troops across the entire front in the absence of General Todorov at the headquarters. In addition, he demonstrated too much confidence, which led him down a wrong path during the course of the battle. As a former commanding officer of the 2nd Infantry Division, he was perfectly familiar with the characteristics of the terrain at Dobro Pole--restricted and difficult to access by the enemy. Even though he was aware of his adversary's capabilities to fight in mountainous terrain, he did not assess completely the probability of a French-Serbian penetration at Dobro Pole, as Colonel Stanchev would write later: "The subsequent

development of the situation proved that there are no inaccessible approaches for the infantryman at Dobro Pole.”⁵⁴ Without taking into consideration the changed conditions of the Bulgarian troops and their decreased capabilities to defeat another major enemy offensive, he was convinced that by sending all reserves at hand, unit by unit towards the sector of penetration, he could still block the Allied advance. These efforts, however, resulted only in the rapid depletion of all the resources the Bulgarian High Command had at its disposal.⁵⁵

General Hristo Burmov was commissioned in 1889, upon graduation of the military school in Sofia. He attended the Command and General Staff College in Turin, Italy and graduated from it in 1898. Until his first participation in combat operations during the Balkan Wars as Chief of Staff of the 1st (Balkan) Division, Burmov occupied different command and staff positions, to include military attaché in Vienna. During the initial phase of the Central Powers’ campaign in Serbia and Macedonia, he distinguished himself as an efficient brigade commander, who kept the morale of his troops through personal example and demonstration of courage in the offensive operations against the Serbian and French Armies.⁵⁶ In April 1916, he was appointed commander of the 10th (Belomorska) Infantry Division, which had to defend along the White Sea coast where the intensity of the fight was relatively low, compared to the sectors further west. From May 1917 until his appointment as Chief of Staff of the Active Army in July 1918, General Burmov commanded the 2nd (Thracian) Division.

As Azmanov suggested, General Burmov had confidence in the tenacity and the high fighting spirit of his troops, which influenced his decisions in the autumn of 1918. Furthermore, during the period when he was in command of Dobro Pole, his division

successfully defeated the Entente spring offensive against this sector of the defense in 1918. These events had probably further strengthened the General Burmov's belief in the impregnability of the position. However, according to Colonel Stanchev, whose 30th Infantry Regiment defended Dobro Pole at that time, he was only partially correct in his assessment: "The success of the actions on 27-30 May 1918 at Dobro Pole came as a result of the morale, the high spirit of the troops, rather than the solid fortified position."⁵⁷ Furthermore, by September the same year even this factor would not have the same strength as during the spring. Nevertheless, when General Burmov had to give directions to his subordinates at the time of the breakthrough as an army chief of staff, he based his decisions on those two assumptions, which eventually turned out to be false. His initial hesitation and delayed response to send reinforcements was one of the factors that allowed the rapid advance of the Allies.⁵⁸

Nikola Ribarov graduated from the military school in Sofia in 1888. Like the majority of the senior Bulgarian commanders in World War I, he took part in the Serbian-Bulgarian War and later in the Balkan Wars as the 3rd Infantry Division Commander. Similar to General Burmov, General Ribarov brilliantly led his 3rd Division in the Bulgarian Army offensive operations against Serbia, winning all the engagements his division was involved in. Furthermore, as a commander of the Second Army detachment in the *ad hoc* formed Operational Group North, he contributed to the success of the Kosovo operation in 1915.⁵⁹

While General Burmov spent roughly one year at Dobro Pole as commander of the 2nd Infantry Division and relied heavily on the strength of the position and its defenders, General Ribarov had more than two years on his disposal to develop the

defensive line of his 3rd Division. However, his initial guidance to his subordinates on the organization of the division defense came too late in the spring of 1916. Thus, the efforts of his troops were split between fortifying what was initially considered to be the main defensive line on one hand and the establishment of forward positions, on the other. When General Ribarov finally decided how to deploy his troops, he designated those forward positions as his primary defensive line, even though it provided less favorable conditions for the defenders. As Colonel Andreev suggested in his book, the 3rd Division Commander probably chose to concentrate the forces under his command well forward in order to occupy more advantageous attack positions for a possible Bulgarian offensive in the summer of 1916 with the First Army as the main effort.⁶⁰

However, as a result of the overall unsuccessful attack of the First Army, the 3rd Division lost to the Serbian troops some of the key terrain it previously occupied. Analyzing the unfavorable course of the operation for the Bulgarian Army, General Ribarov took preventive measures to protect the right flank of his division, which would become exposed to the allied counterattack, should the Bulgarian troops continue to withdraw. Therefore, he ordered his reserves to begin fortifying an interim position along the line Mount Sokol--Smeica towards Gradeschnica. As General Ribarov envisioned, by November 1916 the 3rd Division was forced to fall back to these new positions, to include Dobro Pole. Even though his decision to establish positions along this secondary line of defense in order to protect his flank was tactically sound at that time, once the Serbian counteroffensive was over he did not examine the options for an alternative main defensive position, providing better protection for the troops and requiring less extensive work to properly fortify it. As described earlier in this chapter, a suitable position would

have been the line Schejnovec--Stojanova Height--Smeica, while only combat outposts could have been established at the forward position. However, a course of action that included an element of withdrawal would have never be appreciated by the division and army command, due to the existing perception among the senior Bulgarian commanders that “the Bulgarian Soldier never loses the ground he had set his foot on.”⁶¹

Even though the positions of the 3rd Infantry Division had to be organized in three lines of defense according to the reports sent by the division headquarters to the Active Army Headquarters, by the summer of 1918 only the first one was established, with significant discrepancies with the existing requirements in the Bulgarian Army at that time.⁶² It is difficult to identify the reasons behind the fact that a successful offensive commander like General Ribarov did not conduct inspection of his division’s positions in order to control the implementation of his plans. Nor did he reflect his further guidance in any directive to his subordinate commanders until September 1918. Even more surprising is the fact that none of the superior German headquarters, despite their extensive experience from the Western Front, made any attempts to provide focus and even require that the 3rd and 2nd Divisions corrected and improved their defenses. However, in July 1918 the German command requested General Zhekov to replace General Ribarov, even though the insufficient preparation of his defensive positions was not part of the arguments for his removal.⁶³

Similar to the majority of the senior Bulgarian commanders on the Macedonian Front, Ivan Rusev received his training and education at the military school in Sofia. A graduate of the Russian General Staff Nikolayev Military Academy, he occupied different command and staff positions in the Bulgarian Army. He participated in the

Balkan Wars as a division chief of staff and started World War I as the Chief of Staff of the Second Army. In 1916, he was appointed commander of the 7th (Rila) Division and towards the end of the campaign he replaced General Burmov as commander of the 2nd Infantry Division. Immediately upon assuming command in July 1918, General Rusev issued an order for the development of the division defense in depth, since only the first line positions were fortified at that time.⁶⁴ Despite his efforts, however, due to time constraints little could be done to significantly improve the 2nd Division's positions prior to the Entente offensive.

This analysis suggests that the leadership of the Bulgarian senior leadership at Dobro Pole suffered from the negative influence of several tendencies. The first hurdle was the commanders' offensive mindset, inherited from the previous two wars, and the transition into a purely defensive campaign approach, imposed on them by their allies. Another erroneous conception was the overreliance on the inaccessibility of the terrain and the tenacity of the troops under their command. Lastly, the unrealistic concept of defensive operations based on the existing paradigms among the Bulgarian senior military leaders, who considered that holding the positions occupied by Bulgarian troops at any cost is a matter of honor and that any retrograde operation would decrease the morale of those troops, also contributed to the ineffective organization of the defense.

The deficiencies in the command at the breakthrough sector during the organization of the defense and the preparation of the positions became even more evident in the course of the battle. When inspecting the front lines on the 16 September 1918, after the Allies achieved their initial breakthrough, General Todorov was surprised to see that the 3rd Infantry Division headquarters had withdrawn far back to the rear and

had no reliable communications with its subordinate units. Not only was the division commander, General Ribarov, unable to give an update on the situation to the Commander-in-Chief, but he evidently had lost confidence in his own ability to cope with the situation.⁶⁵ General Todorov wrote in a telegram to his headquarters:

The situation here is not clear and changes every hour. The units are disorganized, especially the 29th, 32nd, and 80th Regiments, and the 24th to an extent. There is no communication with the neighboring units and no decision has been made in advance to stabilize a new front; the way the situation develops, the enemy will not have difficulties in achieving further success.⁶⁶

Despite General Todorov's attempts to take control of the situation, leading from the front lines himself, he was unable to achieve the necessary coordination between the withdrawing units, the reserves thrown into the battle piece by piece, and the German command of the Army Group von Scholtz.⁶⁷

To add to the confusion, the LXI Corps Commander requested the replacement of the 2nd Infantry Division commander, General Rusev. The reason was that on the night of 16 September General Rusev ordered his division to withdraw north of the Zaduka River, without informing his adjacent units, the 4th and 3rd Infantry Divisions, according to the corps commander. Even though the 4th Infantry Division Commander, General Toshev, testified later that he had been notified about the withdrawal, which the tactical situation dictated, after three days of heavy fighting, General Rusev had to hand over the command of his division to General Nikolov. In either case, this was an indicator of the problematic interaction between the Bulgarian and German commanders.⁶⁸

Conduct of the Operation

After a massive 20-hour artillery preparation, which started at 08:00 on 14 September 1918, the Allies launched their offensive against the Bulgarian positions

between Lakes Ohrid and Doiran. Having identified the vulnerability in the Bulgarian-German defensive lines, General d'Esperey directed his main effort against the weakest part of the defensive line--the boundary between the 30th and 29th Regiments, in other words the 2nd and 3rd Divisions. At the same time, however, a concentration of Entente troops covered by heavy artillery fire was detected further west in the area of Monastir.⁶⁹ The effect of the surprise of such a large scale offensive initially caused confusion among the army group staff. Not being able to assess what the main objective of the Entente was, General von Scholtz directed his reserves to Monastir, more than 30 kilometers west of Dobro Pole.⁷⁰

Meanwhile, the Serbian Second Army advanced against Dobro Pole with three divisions in the first echelon. The Sumadija Division attacked the 32nd Infantry Regiment at Veternik to the east, the 17th French Colonial Division attacked the 29th Infantry Regiment in the center, and the 122nd French Division attacked the defensive lines of the 10th and 30th Infantry Regiments between Sokol and Dobro Pole to the west. The Serbian Yugoslav and Timok Divisions followed as a second tactical echelon in order to exploit the success of the first echelon divisions against Dobro Pole and Veternik. The Allies launched their decisive operation to the rear of the Dobro Pole position against Mount Schejnovec, concentrating their forces on the narrow frontage between the Dobro Pole River and the Strupino River. Within 5 hours, they secured their primary objective, the Greek Post, and after three attacks, followed in turn by Bulgarian counterattacks, they seized their secondary objective--Mount Schejnovec. Thus, the French-Serbian troops succeeded in outflanking and attacking the 30th Regiment's

positions from the rear, thereby determining, to a large extent, the outcome of the operation (see figure 4).⁷¹

At the same time, despite the tenacious resistance and determination of the 10th Infantry Regiment during this initial phase of the battle, the French troops, supported by the Serbian Drina Division of the First Serbian Army further west, achieved local superiority against the Bulgarian positions at Sokol. Much to the defenders' disadvantage, due to an ill-timed decision by the Bulgarian High Command, the 10th Regiment commander with nine of his officers and another 200 troops was called off the front lines to Sofia for a reception ball in honor of the kings of Bavaria and Saxony.⁷² Thus, lacking a significant portion of its manpower and leadership, the 10th Regiment could not render the anticipated resistance against the Serbian and French troops. Therefore, by the afternoon of 15 September the Allied forces were able to take control of the second most important key position of the Bulgarian defense at the Dobro Pole sector, even though the regimental reserves continued the fight from single isolated positions until 10:30 in the evening.⁷³

After the Entente troops seized the first line of the Bulgarian defense, on 16 September the Eleventh Army Commander, General von Steuben, ordered the 2nd and 3rd Divisions to withdraw with their left and right flanks, respectively, along the line Jarebitschina--Tzar Ferdinand--Kozjak--Preslap. Given the advantages, which the terrain features of these positions offered to the defenders, that was a timely and tactically sound decision. Nevertheless, due to the high numbers of casualties among the 1-8 and 2-3 Infantry Brigades, the absence of man-made obstacles and fortifications along this line of defense, and the depleted ammunition supply, the remnants of these two divisions could

not block the Allies' advance further north. In addition, due to the lack of unity of command at the breakthrough sector it was almost impossible to coordinate the activities of all units that were defending it.⁷⁴

In order to mitigate at least some of these negative factors, General von Steuben appointed General von Reuters, who commanded the army group reserve up to that point, to take command over the units at the breakthrough sector. In a very short notice, he had to form a composite division of the remnants of the 1-8 and 2-3 Infantry Brigades, reinforced by the LXI Corps reserve. Even though General von Reuters was one of the most experienced and capable German commanders at the Macedonian Front, he had significant doubts that he would be able to fulfill the task he was assigned. Not only was the situation very complex, but at the time he received the order, he was neither familiar with the troops under his command, nor with the characteristics of the terrain and the positions he had to defend. Further, his staff had to be augmented and additional communication lines had to be established, in order to achieve control of the troops along the wider frontage his division was given. General von Reuters had to assume command of the breakthrough sector after an initial orientation no later than 17 September. Even though he had a quick update of the situation by General Rusev, due to the rapid flow of the operations and the lack of efficient communications, he never managed to establish contact with his subordinate brigade commanders and give them direct orders.⁷⁵

Meanwhile, the Allies resumed their offensive against the Bulgarian second defensive line early in the morning on 16 September. The Serbian Sumadija and Timok Divisions attacked the positions of the 2-3 and 1-3 Brigades to the east, while the Danube, Drina, and Morava Divisions advanced to the west against the 1-8 Brigade and

the rest of the 2nd Division. The Yugoslav Division advanced in the center towards Kozjak, followed by the two French divisions as reserve.⁷⁶ Having committed their scattered tactical reserves, with no operational and strategic level reserves available at hand, the Bulgarian and German commands were unable to slow down the momentum of the advancing Entente troops and block them at the second defensive line.

Furthermore, as a result of miscommunication between the LXI Corps Commander, General Karl Suren and the 2nd Division Commander, General Rusev, the latter ordered the withdrawal of his troops from the defensive positions at Kozjak across the Cerna River, even though his division was not threatened by an overwhelming opposing force. While General Suren denied responsibility for the premature retreat, claiming the directions to his subordinate units were to start withdrawing on order, General Rusev insisted that the German liaison officer confirmed beyond any doubt that the order was to start immediate movement northeast.⁷⁷ After General Rusev's relief, requested by the LXI Corps Commander, General von Reuters had to assume command of the 2nd Division troops until General Nikolov's arrival on 20 September, which further impeded the effective control of the troops across the breakthrough front. In addition, the new situation caused the subsequent withdrawal of the 3rd Division towards the Vardar River to the east and that of the 4th Division across the Cerna River to the west, in order to prevent envelopment of their exposed flanks. Thus, the gap between the 2nd and 3rd Divisions became wider, forcing General Reuters to stretch his left flank in an attempt to keep the tactical bond with the 3rd Division, thereby making his front thinner and weaker.⁷⁸

Meanwhile, following the successful defeat of the British and Greek troops at Doiran on 18 September, General Nerezov, the First Army Commander, proposed a daring plan. He suggested that his army, together with the Second Bulgarian Army from its positions further southeast could launch a counteroffensive with the objective to seize the Entente positions at Salonika, while General d'Esperey's main forces were engaged by the Eleventh Army deep in the Macedonian mountains.⁷⁹ Even though the Bulgarian Command considered that the counterattack was the only feasible option at this stage of the battle, the Eleventh Army Commander, General von Steuben was reluctant to undertake any offensive efforts.⁸⁰ Instead, during a conference in Prilep on 19 September, he insisted on the conduct of an organized retreat, causing the Allies to stretch further their lines of communication, thereby creating the conditions to outflank the bulk of their forces with the Eleventh Army to the west and the 3rd Division to the east.⁸¹ Even though General Todorov's concept of operations envisioned that the efforts should be aimed at retaining the current positions until sufficient reserves from the First Army arrived, he did not try to impose his decision on how the operation should progress. However, he provided freedom of action to General von Steuben to make the necessary decisions as the situation developed in his sector of the front. Thus, not for the first time in this campaign, the Bulgarian and German commands were not able to reach a unanimous decision and agree upon a synchronized plan for the defense of the entire front.⁸²

The situation on the Macedonian Front called for a leader powerful enough to coordinate the efforts of all subordinate units, capable of making daring decisions and executing them in a timely and efficient manner. Instead, General Todorov went back to the front lines, trying to contain the advancing Allied troops in the area south of Krivolak,

while the Active Army Headquarters awaited the promised German reserves from the Western Front, which never arrived. The overoptimistic Acting Chief of Staff, General Burmov, strongly believed that the situation would improve and the morale of the troops would return to its previous levels as in the first two days of the Allies' offensive. Meanwhile, General von Scholtz made a decision, approved by General Todorov, to withdraw all Bulgarian and German troops in the late evening of 20 September, trading time for space to allow the reserves to reach the breakthrough sector. The morale of the troops, however, was deteriorating faster than the tempo of the retreat, turning it into a rout. Furthermore, the victorious troops of the First Army were stunned by the order to start withdrawing, thus leaving the almost impregnable defensive positions at Doiran without being defeated, which spread the sense of despair among them as well.⁸³

As the Allies continued their advance, they met little resistance from the retreating units of the 2nd and 3rd Divisions and by 22 September were able to reach Krivolak. It was only at that point that the Bulgarian High Command decided upon a larger scale withdrawal of the Eleventh Army ahead of the Entente troops, which would allow the dispersed Bulgarian units to consolidate into a strong reserve force in the area of Skopje out of enemy contact, while the First Army disrupted the Allies' advance to the northeast in the area of the Belasitza Mountain. This would potentially create the necessary favorable conditions to conduct a decisive counteroffensive against the overstretched Allied troops.⁸⁴ The decision came too late though: the high rate of advance of the Serbian and French units; the increasing demoralization among the Bulgarian troops; and, the lack of confidence in the victory among the majority of the commanders on the ground gave little prospect for success. Thus, in order to preserve at least the integrity of

the Second Bulgarian Army, on 25 September General Todorov called the Prime Minister with a recommendation to initiate negotiations for armistice with the Entente.⁸⁵

¹Toshev, *Pobedeni bez da budem biti*, 106.

²Azmanov, *Urocut ot Dobro pole*, 14-15.

³Noikov, *Zashto ne pobedihme*, 143.

⁴Azmanov, *Urocut ot Dobro pole*, 18.

⁵Noikov, *Zashto ne pobedihme*, 146-147.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., 17.

⁸Colonel (major at that time) Boyan Stanchev was a battalion commander in 30th Infantry (Sheinovo) Regiment in 1918.

⁹Boyan Stanchev, *Sheinovtzi na Dobro pole* (Sofia: Voenno-izdatelski fond, 1937), 12.

¹⁰Stanchev, *Sheinovtzi na Dobro pole*, 37-39. Noikov and Dieterich provide slightly different figures of the number of artillery pieces of the belligerents in the eve of the 1918 offensive, which include both guns and howitzers. See notes 18 and 19.

¹¹Toshev, *Pobedeni bez da budem biti*, 106-107.

¹²Dieterich, "Krayat na svetovната voina na Makedonskiya front," 60.

¹³Noikov, *Zashto ne pobedihme*, 176.

¹⁴According to General Dieterich, the strength of the Entente forces in this sector of the attack was 57,000 Serbian and French troops and 566 artillery pieces. See Dieterich, "Krayat na svetovната voina na Makedonskiya front," 23.

¹⁵Noikov, *Zashto ne pobedihme*, 177.

¹⁶Stanchev, *Sheinovtzi na Dobro pole*, 43.

¹⁷Dieterich, "Krayat na svetovната voina na Makedonskiya front," 20.

¹⁸Noikov, *Zashto ne pobedihme*, 151.

¹⁹Some authors as General Toshev count the force ratio at Dobro pole as 3:1 in favor of the Allies. See Toshev, *Pobedeni bez da budem biti*, 114.

²⁰Noikov, *Zashto ne pobedihme*, 177-178.

²¹158, according to Dieterich. See Dieterich, “Krayat na svetovната voina na Makedonskiya front,” 23.

²²Noikov, *Zashto ne pobedihme*, 178. According to Andreev, the ratio in artillery guns was 5:1 in favour of the Allies. See note 10.

²³Stanchev, *Sheinovtzi na Dobro pole*, 39.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 17.

²⁵Dieterich, “Krayat na svetovната voina na Makedonskiya front,” 24-25.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 125.

²⁷Stanchev, *Sheinovtzi na Dobro pole*, 6.

²⁸Andreev, “Kum Dobro pole prez 1916,” 126-127.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 21.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 31.

³¹*Ibid.*, 32.

³²Palmer, “Defeat of Bulgaria: The Central Powers Begin to Crack,” 2982.

³³Stanchev, *Sheinovtzi na Dobro pole*, 17.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 95.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 7-8.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 8-12.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 47-51.

³⁸Andreev, *Kum Dobro pole prez 1916*: 132.

³⁹Stanchev, *Sheinovtzi na Dobro pole*, 41-42.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 37.

⁴¹Noikov, *Zashto ne pobedihme*, 176-177.

- ⁴²Ibid., 181.
- ⁴³Hall, *Balkan Breakthrough*, 44.
- ⁴⁴Toshev, *Pobedeni bez da budem biti*, 121.
- ⁴⁵Dieterich, “Krayat na svetovната voina na Makedonskiya front,” 33.
- ⁴⁶Palmer, “Defeat of Bulgaria: The Central Powers Begin to Crack,” 2983.
- ⁴⁷Hall, *Balkan Breakthrough*, 137.
- ⁴⁸Toshev, *Pobedeni bez da budem biti*, 124-125.
- ⁴⁹Andreev, “Kum Dobro pole prez 1916,” 18-19.
- ⁵⁰Noikov, *Zashto ne pobedihme*, 173.
- ⁵¹Stanchev, *Sheinovtzi na Dobro pole*, 94.
- ⁵²Ibid., 23.
- ⁵³Azmanov, *Urocut ot Dobro pole*, 26.
- ⁵⁴Stanchev, *Sheinovtzi na Dobro pole*, 15.
- ⁵⁵Azmanov, *Urocut ot Dobro pole*, 27.
- ⁵⁶Dimitur Azmanov, *Moyata epoha* (Sofia: Sveti Georgi Pobedonosec, 1995), 174.
- ⁵⁷Stanchev, *Sheinovtzi na Dobro pole*, 51.
- ⁵⁸Dimitur Azmanov, *Bulgarskite vishi voennachalnici prez Balkanskata i Purvata svetovna voina* (Sofia: Voenno izdatelstvo, 2000), 360.
- ⁵⁹Svetlozar Nedev, *Komandvaneto na Bulgarskata voiska prez voinite za nacionalno obedinenie* (Sofia: Sveti Georgi Pobedonosec, 1993), 152.
- ⁶⁰Andreev, “Kum Dobro pole prez 1916,” 26-27.
- ⁶¹Ibid., 27-28.
- ⁶²Noikov, *Zashto ne pobedihme*, 173-174.
- ⁶³Ibid., 175-176.
- ⁶⁴Ibid., 173.

- ⁶⁵Ibid., 194.
- ⁶⁶Toshev, *Pobedeni bez da budem biti*, 132.
- ⁶⁷Ibid., 136.
- ⁶⁸Ibid., 130.
- ⁶⁹Noikov, *Zashto ne pobedihme*, 188.
- ⁷⁰Palmer, "Defeat of Bulgaria: The Central Powers Begin to Crack," 2983.
- ⁷¹Toshev, *Pobedeni bez da budem biti*, 122.
- ⁷²Ibid.
- ⁷³Azmanov, *Urocut ot Dobro pole*, 44.
- ⁷⁴Noikov, *Zashto ne pobedihme*, 189-192.
- ⁷⁵Dieterich, "Krayat na svetovната voina na Makedonskiya front," 31-33.
- ⁷⁶Toshev, *Pobedeni bez da budem biti*, 126.
- ⁷⁷Ibid., 129-130.
- ⁷⁸Dieterich, "Kraiat na svetovната voina na Makedonskiya front," 50.
- ⁷⁹Palmer, "Defeat of Bulgaria: The Central Powers Begin to Crack," 2985.
- ⁸⁰Toshev, *Pobedeni bez da budem biti*, 132.
- ⁸¹Palmer, "Defeat of Bulgaria: The Central Powers Begin to Crack," 2985.
- ⁸²Azmanov, *Urocut ot Dobro pole*, 72.
- ⁸³Toshev, *Pobedeni bez da budem biti*, 142.
- ⁸⁴Noikov, *Zashto ne pobedihme*, 209-210.
- ⁸⁵Toshev, *Pobedeni bez da budem biti*, 136.

CHAPTER 3

THE DOIRAN DEFENSE

Introduction

In every combat operation, especially in the positional defense warfare, preparation is the most important factor for success Preparation should encompass all: extensive fortification of the positions and proper organization of the defense; permanent surveillance of the battlefield and reliable communications between the units (infantry, artillery, etc.) and their commanders; planning and preparation of the infantry for quick counterattacks; preparation of the artillery to provide timely support for the infantry in all possible situations; maintaining the high morale of the troops, inspiring them with confidence in the strength of the position and certainty in our victory... During my inspections, I repeatedly assured the officers and the Soldiers that their position is strong enough, defended by sufficient number of troops and extensively fortified.

— General Vladimir Vazov, after assuming command of the
9th Infantry (Pleven) Division at Doiran

The Allied forces' operation against the Bulgarian defensive positions between the Vardar River and Lake Doiran in September 1918 was preceded by two unsuccessful major offensive operations in August 1916 (with five attempts for penetration) and April-May 1917 (with three attempts for penetration).¹ By the end of the war, the Doiran position had won its reputation as a strong, impregnable, efficient defense, the seizure of which remained a highly desired but yet unaccomplished objective for both General Maurice Sarrail and General Franchet d'Esperey.

In the spring of 1916, the sector of the Bulgarian defense located between Vardar and Doiran was occupied by the 9th Infantry (Pleven) Division and the 2nd Brigade of the 2nd Infantry (Thracian) Division (2-2 Infantry Brigade). On 9 August 1916, the Entente Salonika Army launched its first major offensive against the Bulgarian troops at Doiran, with three French and one British divisions and more than 400 guns. After ten

days of intensive fight and more than 3,200 people killed, captured, and wounded, the Allied troops were forced to withdraw.² The commanding officer of the 9th Division at that time was General Stefan Nerezov, who was appointed commander of the First Army later in the course of the war. In the autumn of 1916, as a result of the reorganization of the Bulgarian defense on the Macedonian Front, the 9th Division took control of the whole sector. On 1 March 1917, General Vladimir Vazov (colonel at that time) assumed command of the 9th Infantry (Pleven) Division.

General Vazov's appointment coincided with the preparation of another major Entente offensive against the Vardar-Doiran defensive sector, the objective of which was to achieve a swift breakthrough, thereby defeating the Bulgarian-German forces on the Southern Front and eliminating the participation of Bulgaria in the war. The Entente spring offensive started on 22 April and continued through 9 May 1917. As a former artillery commander, General Vazov successfully employed aggressive indirect fire in combination with the machine gun and other small arms fire of the defenders at the forward positions to defeat the British attacks. By the evening of 9 May, the Allies had to terminate the offensive due to the heavy casualties inflicted by the Bulgarian artillery fire and decisive counterattacks. The 1917 spring offensive cost them another 12,000 casualties, 2,250 of which were buried by the defenders at Doiran.³ On 21 May 1917, Vladimir Vazov received a telegram from the Chief of Staff of the Active Army, General Ivan Lukov, notifying him of his promotion to lieutenant-general.⁴

Mission

Higher Headquarters' Plan

The Allies' unsuccessful attempt to achieve decisive victory at Doiran in the spring of 1917 was followed by a relatively low-intensity period with no major engagements along this sector of the Macedonian Front until the spring of 1918. The stalemate was interrupted only by the harassing artillery fire of the Salonika Army against the Bulgarian positions and the sporadic small-scale raids and reconnaissance patrol activities against the adversaries' first line positions. The troops under General Vazov's command, however, did not waste their time waiting for the next allied offensive. Nor were they left to be overwhelmed by the general lethargy, which reigned over the trenches of the Macedonian Front. Even though the defense was tactically well organized and developed in depth to a certain degree by the previous commander, General Vazov identified certain deficiencies in the defensive system at Doiran.

By the autumn of 1916, the Doiran defense was organized in a main defensive position and forward positions, which covered only part of the front. Combat security outposts were established ahead of the forward line of defense, 1.5-2 kilometers away from the British positions. In General Vazov's perspective, however, the defense was neither fully developed nor sufficiently fortified. The main position consisted of only one trench, enhanced by sparsely spread barbed wire and limited number of personnel shelters. In addition, the forward position, which was established only in front of a small sector of the defense to the east, could not provide reliable protection to the defenders from the British heavy artillery fire.⁵

In 1917, General Vazov had under his command seven regiments, to include the attached 39th (Salonika) Regiment of the Mountain Division, stretched in a single line along a 28-kilometer front, with no viable options for a robust reserve force. In accordance with the First Army Commander's orders, the 9th Infantry Division's defensive position was further divided into three sectors, occupied by two brigades to the flanks and one regiment at the weakest central sector. The 9th Division commander, however, considered that, due to the mountainous terrain, a frontage of such width and depth would be difficult to control by a single division headquarters against an overwhelming enemy force.⁶ The 1917 Allies' spring campaign further confirmed his assessment.

Analysis of the Mission and Operations Planning

Based on his analysis of the battle in the spring of 1917 and assessment of the 9th Division positions and task, General Vazov came to the conclusion that the First Army defense between Vardar and Doiran had to be reorganized in order to achieve further success against another major Entente offensive. After conducting his own estimate of the possible options to mitigate the shortfalls identified during the analysis of the mission, the 9th Division Commander suggested to the First Army commander, General Dimitur Geshov, to divide the sector between Vardar and Doiran into two division defensive areas, each 14 kilometers wide. He proposed to take control with his division of the eastern segment, which was the one with the greater tactical importance and more frequently attacked by the Entente troops.

Nevertheless, it was not until General Nerezov assumed command of the First Army in July 1918 that the actual decision to divide the sector between the Mountain

Division to the west and the 9th Infantry Division to the east was made (see figure 5).⁷ Without requesting additional augmentations, General Nerezov regrouped the forces under his command in a manner that provided him with sufficient density of units on the main position, while retaining a strong reserve force for decisive counterattacks. The army reserve was comprised of two regiments (66th and 4th), which was equal to the reserve of the Army Group von Scholtz.⁸ The positions north of Lake Doiran, previously occupied by two of the regiments of the Mountain Division, were assigned to the 1st Brigade of the 11th (Macedonian) Division (1-11 Brigade).⁹ The task given to the 9th Division by the First Army Commander was to persistently defend the assigned position, shattering the enemy's advance, while maintaining tactical link with the Mountain Division to the west and the 1-11 Brigade to the east.¹⁰

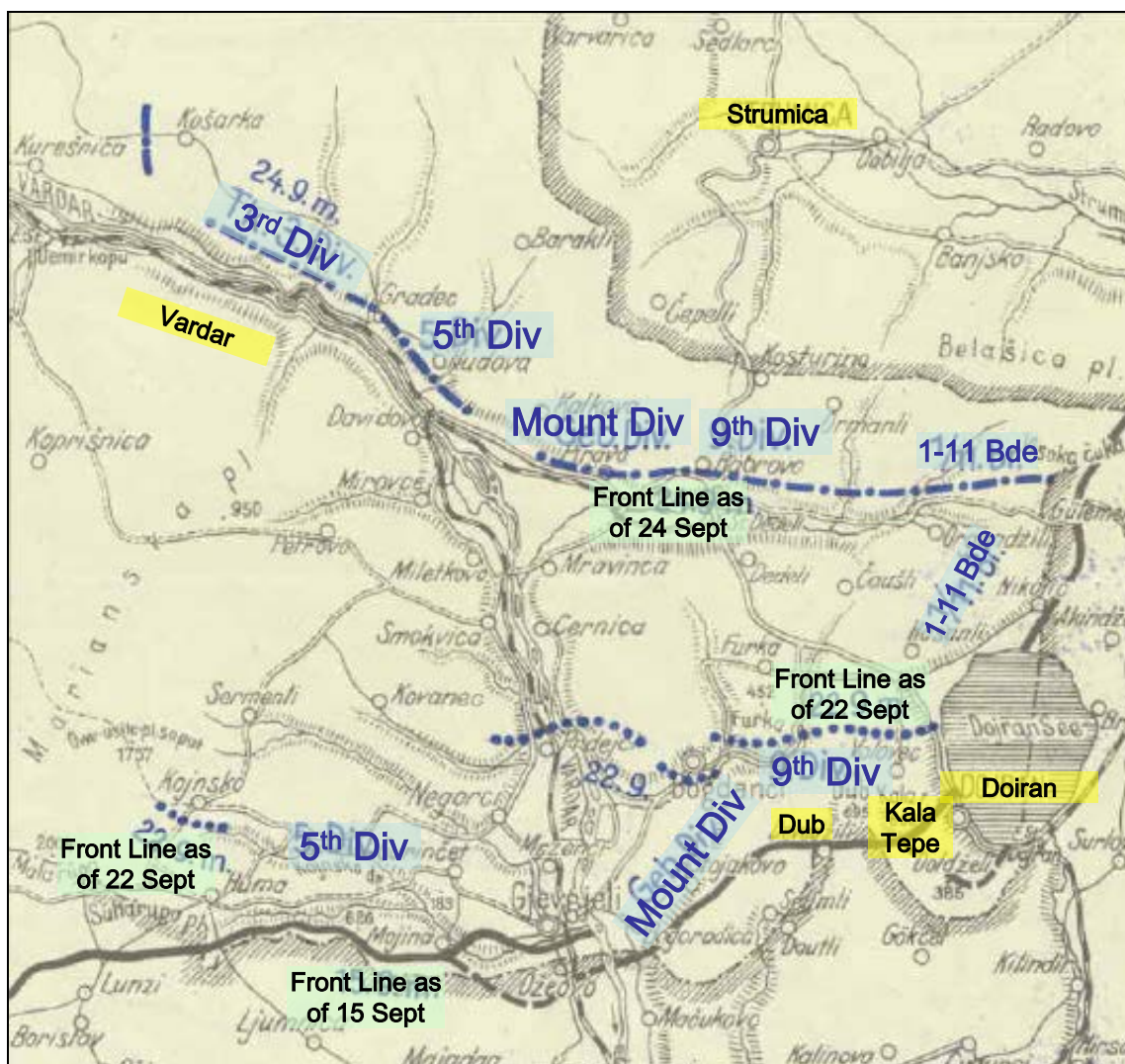


Figure 5. First Bulgarian Army Operations, 1918

Source: Dieterich, *Weltkriegsende an der Mazedonischen Front* (Berlin: Druck und Verlag von Gerhard Stalling, 1926).

Having achieved the desired frontage for a successful division defense, General Vazov further organized his positions into two brigade sectors, each of the brigades ensuring control of one of the two key terrain features--Mount Dub and Mount Kala Tepe. With the designation of only one regiment as a division reserve, General Vazov sought to achieve greater flexibility and freedom of maneuver for his subordinate brigade

and regiment commanders. Bearing in mind the difficulties that the mountainous terrain and the lack of accessible routes presented for the employment of the division reserve in a timely manner, he left the lower echelons commanders with sufficient forces to maintain their own reserves in order to achieve depth of the main defensive positions and execute counterattacks down to the lowest possible level.¹¹

Enemy

Composition, Disposition, and Strength

Towards the end of the summer of 1918, the Entente troops on the Macedonian Front were comprised of 28 divisions (about 717,000 troops), 2,609 artillery pieces, and 2,682 machine guns.¹² General d'Esperey appointed the Commander-in-Chief of the British Salonika Army, General George Milne, as the commanding officer of the supporting effort of the Entente offensive--the attack up the Vardar River against the Bulgarian First Army. The overall purpose of this operation was to initially fix the Bulgarian troops at Doiran, thereby providing freedom of action for his decisive operation further west in Morihovsko (against Dobro Pole). Once the Allies were able to penetrate the defensive positions at Dobro Pole, d'Esperey's main effort would shift to the British Salonika Army at the Doiran sector.

General Milne's forces, designated for the offensive against the First Army, consisted of four British and two Greek infantry divisions, supported by 232 guns and 24 howitzers.¹³ Unlike some of the French colonial units, the British forces were comprised of regular army units, well trained and highly disciplined. The 22nd, 26th, 27th, and 28th Infantry Brigades had been deployed since 1915-1916 on the Macedonian Front¹⁴ and the 9th Infantry Division had already experienced their combat skills during the Entente

offensives in 1917 and in the spring of 1918. Even though the Greek troops had not been employed at Doiran thus far, most of the commanders at Doiran were aware of their capabilities and familiar with their tactics, since they had fought alongside or against them during the Balkan wars. Similar to the Serbian troops, the Greeks also had received a certain level of training from the Allies. An intelligence officer of the British Salonika Army provided his assessment of the Greek units' capabilities: "Greek infantry, when well trained and led, are past masters of attack."¹⁵

Assessment of the Adversary's Capabilities and Intent

General Milne's main effort lay with the XII British Corps against the 9th Division defensive positions, while the supporting effort was directed against the 1-11 Brigade northeast of Lake Doiran with the Cretan Division and elements of the XVI British Corps in flanking maneuver. His intent was to conduct a penetration of the First Army positions at the 9th Division's defensive sector, thereby seizing the strong points at Dub and Kala Tepe in order to create the conditions for exploitation towards Strumitca to the north and Vardar to the west. General Milne's end state envisioned defeat of the Bulgarian First Army and seizure of the lines of communication along the Vardar River valley.¹⁶ According to General d'Esperey's plan, the British attack at Doiran had to be initiated at a later stage of the offensive, once initial success of the main thrust against Dobro Pole had been achieved. He, thereby, sought to achieve operational surprise, which would allow the rapid advance of his troops to the west and north of Doiran.¹⁷

The XII Corps, which was the bulk of the British Salonika Army, was comprised of the 22nd, 26th, and 27th British Divisions and the 83rd Brigade of the 28th British Division (83-28 Brigade), the Greek Seres Division, and the French 2nd Zouaves

Regiment. The rest of the 28th Division and the Greek Cretan Division operated as part of the XVI British Corps north of Lake Doiran against the Bulgarian troops of 1-11 Brigade.¹⁸ The XII corps commander, General Wilson, laid his main effort with the British 22nd Division on the eastern flank, advancing in the gap between the 3rd and 1st Infantry Brigades of the 9th Division (3-9 and 1-9 Brigades) in order to seize the Bulgarian positions at Dub, similar to the attack at Dobro Pole. Meanwhile, the Greek Seres Division had to attack further east along the western shore of Lake Doiran and seize the 1-9 Brigade forward defensive positions. After achieving its initial objective, the 22nd Division, supported by the Seres Division and the 83-28 Brigade, was to attack and seize Kala Tepe, thereby achieving control of the 9th Division main defensive line. Simultaneously, the 26th and 27th Divisions had to conduct a demonstration to the west, as the shaping operation in General Wilson's plan, in order to fix the right flank of the Plevna Division and parts of the Mountain Division (see figure 6).

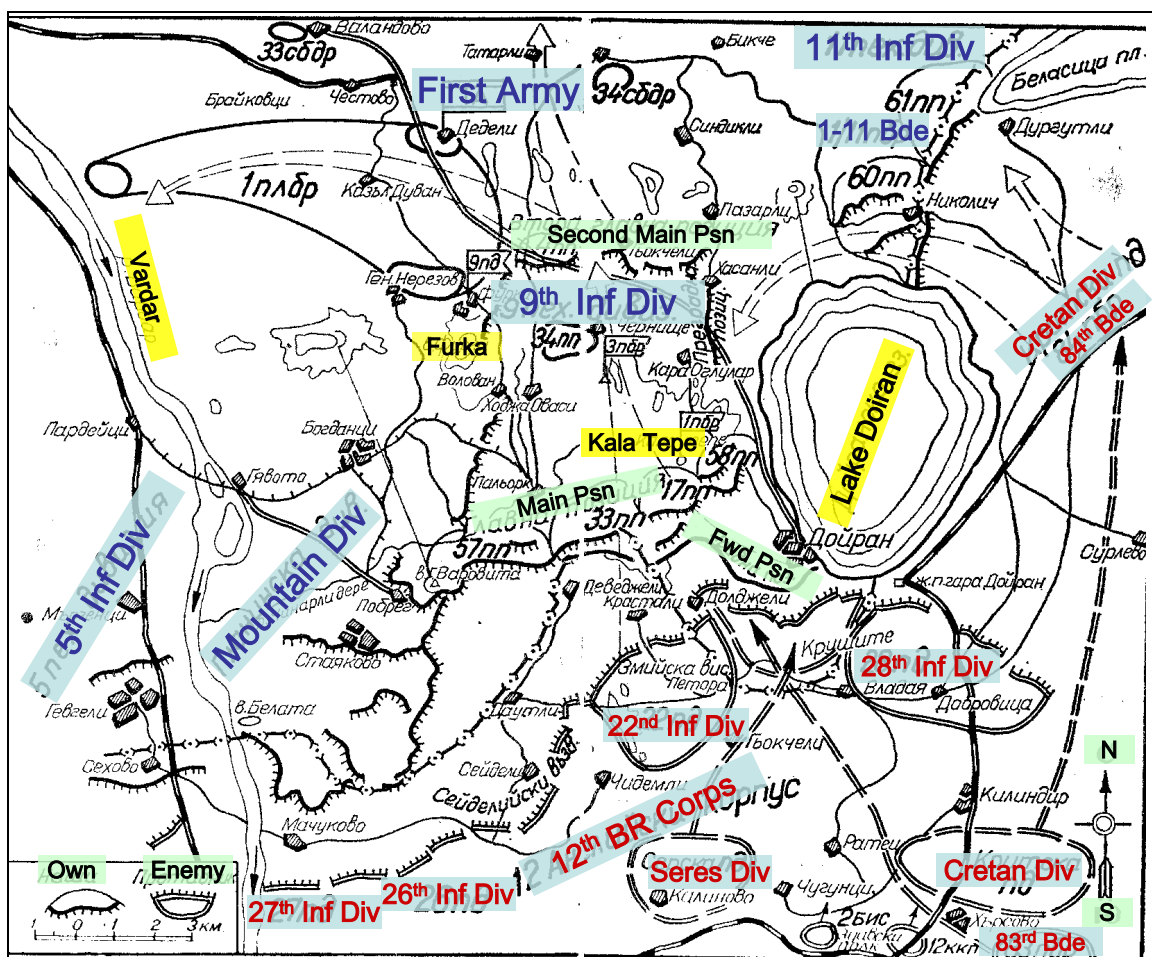


Figure 6. The Doiran Front, 1918--Adversaries' Disposition and Operational Plans
Source: Asen Karaivanov, "Otrbranata na Doiranskata poziciya prez esenta na 1918,"
Voенно-istoricheski sbornik (Book 2 1988).

Along the entire front of the 9th Division (14 kilometers), the British deployed 42 infantry battalions against 17 Bulgarian. In the direction of the decisive operation against 1-9 Brigade, defending a 6.5-kilometer sector between Doldzeli and the western edge of Lake Doiran, the British concentrated 28 battalions against 10 Bulgarian battalions. The force ratio across the entire front of the 9th Division was 2.5:1 infantry battalions in favor of the Allied troops, while at the sector of the main effort it was 2.8:1.¹⁹

According to General Vazov's scheme of maneuver, the 9th Division was to defend with two brigades forward. These were the 3-9 Brigade (57th and 33rd Regiments), which occupied the western sector of the defense along a 7.5-kilometer front and the 1-9 Brigade (17th and 58th Regiments), which was defending along the eastern 6.5-kilometer-wide sector. The 34th Infantry Regiment occupied positions at the second line of the main position as a division reserve. The 4th Infantry Regiment was designated as an army reserve, with its first planning priority--reinforcement of the 9th Division. The 19th Artillery Regiment, with 55 guns, provided fire support to the 3-9 Brigade, while the 9th Artillery Regiment, with 67 guns, supported the 1-9 Brigade as the division main effort.²⁰ The overall ratio in artillery pieces was 1.7:1 in favor of the Allies, while in the sector of the main effort it was 2.2:1.²¹ Applying his extensive experience as an artillery commander during the Balkan Wars, General Vazov organized the division artillery assets in a manner that allowed rapid maneuver and concentration of fire, while minimizing the effects of the British counter-battery fire by using the advantages that the mountainous terrain at the position offered.²²

Terrain

Terrain Effects on the Operations

Similar to the Dobro Pole sector, the Doiran position provided certain advantages for the defenders. As a result of the reorganization of the First Army defense in August upon General Vazov's recommendations, the 9th Division's flanks were secured by the Vardar River to the west and Lake Doiran to the east. In addition, the majority of the ridges that the division occupied dominated the Allies' positions to the south, providing good observation and fields of fire to the defenders. Finally, the relatively well developed

road network at the rear of the position facilitated the timely commitment of the reserve in the course of the battle.²³

At the same time, however, the characteristics of the terrain west of Lake Doiran presented serious challenges to the defending troops. Unlike Dobro Pole, the bare rocky slopes of the Doiran position provided little concealment for the Bulgarian units from enemy aerial reconnaissance. Furthermore, the lack of vegetation and the crumbling soil significantly hampered the construction of fortifications, which had to be constantly repaired and improved. With the exception of the first-line positions stretching across the steep slopes of Dub and Kala Tepe, there were no parallel ridgelines in depth of the position, which could be used as a vantage point to block the enemy's advance once he penetrated the main defensive line on the left flank and in the center.²⁴ Nevertheless, these shortfalls were successfully mitigated by the ability of General Vazov to direct the efforts of his staff and subordinate commanders to develop well organized defense and through the one-and-a-half-year hard work of the troops under his command to reinforce their positions.

Assessment of the Terrain and Organization of the Defense

The strategic importance of the Bulgarian Army defenses between Vardar and Doiran was evident for both the Entente and the Central Powers' forces on the Macedonian Front early during the campaign. The Allies' offensives of 1916 and 1917 confirmed this conviction among the senior leadership. However, the failure of both the French and the British troops to achieve success in those operations, coupled with the intelligence about the intensive movement of allied troops towards Dobro Pole in 1918, did not indicate that another major Entente offensive against the Doiran sector was very

likely. Petko Peev, who fought at Doiran with the 57th (Pleven) Regiment and later became an editor of a military history journal, reflected the overall perception among the Bulgarian senior leadership of the events in the autumn of 1918: “If we speak about surprises to the High Headquarters, then the Allied attack against Doiran appears to be such a surprise. Of all the possible directions, from which the High Headquarters anticipated enemy advance in September, Doiran was the least expected.”²⁵ Nevertheless, the commanders on the ground, General Nerezov and General Vazov, did not rely on the assumption that the British had learned their lesson. They took the necessary measures to enhance the existing favorable conditions at the position in order to ensure success, should the Allies decide to attack at Doiran.

Immediately after assuming command of the 9th Division, General Vazov began his familiarization with the division’s positions, his subordinate commanders, and troops. Having completed his initial assessment of the situation, the new division commander provided his subordinates with detailed guidance on how to improve the work of his predecessor--General Nerezov--by increasing the depth of the positions, enhancing the fortifications, and effectively organizing the indirect fire support.²⁶ The development of the positions was not interrupted even during the 1917 spring offensive and continued during the lulls in the fighting, up until the very day of the attack. By 1918, the main defensive position was already comprised of two continuous 1.5 to 2 meters deep trench lines, connected by a network of communication trenches. The distance between the two trench lines varied between 200 and 1,000 meters depending on the terrain features, which provided mutual support by fire and created a tactical bond between the defending units.²⁷ Furthermore, some of the positions, like those along the Mounts Dub and Kala

Tepe, consisted of three to four trench lines, which added to the depth of the defense. This, in turn, provided freedom of maneuver for the defenders and allowed them to withdraw to subsequent positions while fixing the attacking troops, thereby creating the conditions for the regiment and brigade reserves to counterattack and regain control of the lost positions.²⁸

In addition, a series of observation posts, machine gun emplacements, and dug-in artillery guns were positioned in the space between the trench lines. The two lines of barbed wire in front of the main position, each tens of meters deep presented another obstacle for the attacking Entente troops. The fortification of the forward position and the combat outposts was also significantly improved to provide additional protection to the security units, the observers, and the combat patrols from the intensive British artillery fire. Finally, the 9th Infantry Division established a second line of defense, 2 to 5 kilometers to the rear of the main defensive line.²⁹ Even though it was not fully developed, the position provided excellent cover for the division reserves while they maneuvered across the battlefield during the 1918 engagements. The 9th Division commander's persistence and demanding leadership in preparing the defenses at Doiran were to an extent influenced by his elder brother, Lieutenant-General Georgi Vazov. As an engineer officer and participant in the War of Liberation (1877-78) and the Balkan Wars (1912-13), Georgi Vazov considered the extensive fortification of the positions extremely important for the success of any defensive operation.³⁰

The 9th Division commander gave significant consideration to the coordination of the employment of the reserves across the different levels of command.³¹ This was an important element of the division's preparation and training for the conduct of an active

type of defense, which created an offensive mindset among the Bulgarian troops, had a significant positive impact on their level of morale, and contributed to the successful conduct of the operations. Further, General Vazov paid significant attention to the training and preparation of his artillery units as a crucial element of an efficient World War I defense. He directed the necessary measures improve the survivability of the batteries by building concrete emplacements for the guns and shelters for the crews to protect them from the British bombardments. In addition, each of the brigades developed a system of observation posts along both the forward and the main defensive positions in order to provide constant monitoring of the opposing forces' activities and to direct artillery fire, once the enemy ground assault began.³² Finally, the 9th Division conducted extensive training for the employment of artillery fire in order to achieve the necessary level of responsiveness and synchronization with the infantry units' counterattacks. General Nedev gave a precise description of the performance of the artillery units: "As a result of this thorough preparation, we achieved such a level of perfection that the artillery crews were capable of delivering defensive fires within a minute notice of the moment it has been requested."³³

Between March 1917 and September 1918, the 9th Infantry (Pleven) Division, under the guidance of General Vladimir Vazov developed probably the best organized defensive system on the Macedonian Front. The extensive fortification of the battle positions at Doiran, the integration of the fire of all defensive weapon systems, and the synchronization of the infantry counterattacks with the artillery fire played a significant role for the final outcome of the operation.

Troops

Composition, Strength, and Level of Training

Besides the extensive preparations of the defensive positions, an essential part of General Vazov's efforts were directed towards the development of his subordinate commanders, the systematic training and improvement of the skills of the troops, and the synchronization of the operational activities of all units under his command. The approach he adopted as a commander at Doiran further increased the overall cohesion of the 9th Infantry Division. He recalls in his memoirs:

My task was to prepare my subordinate units for a serious fight, examine all possible scenarios, conduct rehearsals on the conduct of the defense and the counterattacks in different situations, train the infantry and the artillery units to effectively employ fires and the commanders at all levels--to exercise initiative, instill confidence among the troops in the strength of the position and the sufficiency of assets for the defense, achieve close coordination and mutual trust between infantry and artillery, maintain the morale--this was my main and constant concern before the battle commences.³⁴

In order to achieve that, General Vazov and his staff constantly assessed the division's performance and tried to apply not only the lessons of the allied offensive of 1917, but also those of the operations on the Western Front.³⁵ Realizing the crucial importance of reliable communications for the effective command and control in the chaos of combat and the vulnerability of the phone lines under the enemy artillery fire, the division staff organized the employment of alternative means of communication--heliographs, flags, and flares.³⁶ This turned out to be a key factor in the battle, especially when the forward artillery observers had to direct the fire of their batteries. Another important element was the protection of the division personnel against chemical weapons. Even though the Allies had not used gas shells on the Macedonian Front up until that

moment, the 9th Infantry Division conducted regular training on the use of gas masks and developed efficient warning system.³⁷

The introduction of new tactics and techniques, in response to the most recent trends on the Western Front, also played an important role in the ultimate success of the Bulgarian defenders at Doiran. One of these new elements of the defense was the establishment of anti-tank platoons with 53mm artillery guns to counter the possible employment of tanks on the Macedonian Front by the Allies.³⁸ Furthermore, to increase the effectiveness of the defenders' performance and take advantage of the shock effect that the hand grenades had upon the attacking enemy, each of the regiment had to organize and conduct 10-day training courses on handling the grenades in order to achieve maximum accuracy and efficiency at the height of the battle.³⁹ Even though the use of machine guns was not a new element of the defense, particular attention was dedicated to their employment at Doiran by the division command, through forming additional machine gun companies to add to the effect of the artillery and grenade fire.⁴⁰ Furthermore, for the first time on the Macedonian Front specific means (machine guns and artillery guns emplaced on elevated platforms) were designated to fight the Allies' aircraft and provide a certain degree of protection for the troops from the air.⁴¹

On the eve of the offensive, the total strength of the 9th Infantry Division was 18 battalions, five of which comprised the division reserve. Additional five were designated as the army reserve. These units had to cover a 14-kilometer frontage, which created the same density of troops as Dobro Pole: one battalion per 0.8 kilometers front. At the Doiran sector, where General Milne's main effort was directed, each Bulgarian battalion had to cover a one-kilometer frontage, which was twice as much than the troops at Dobro

Pole.⁴² Nevertheless, this organization provided General Vazov with a fairly strong reserve force, which could be employed in either sector of the defense in a timely manner.

Morale and Cohesion

The extensive training of the troops and the improvement of the position significantly raised the confidence of the Soldiers in the successful outcome of the operation and built up trust in their commanders' capabilities. Nevertheless, the negative factors that affected the morale of the troops at Dobro Pole had their impact at Doiran as well. The Allies' propaganda campaigns, the deteriorating economic situation at home, and the decreasing level of trust in Germany's capabilities to fight this protracted war led to isolated attempts to spur mutiny among some of the regiments. In addition, scarce resources, insufficient food, and poor clothing further aggravated the situation, as it did elsewhere across the Macedonian Front.⁴³

Instead of denying the existing problems, however, General Vazov tried to mitigate their negative effect upon his division. By encouraging his subordinate commanders to keep constant contact with the troops and conduct regular talks with them in order to create an accurate perception of the situation and the significance of the sacrifice they were making for their country, the division commander was able to neutralize to a large extent the adversary's information and propaganda campaign. He explained his approach in his memoirs: "I have ordered, whenever someone finds such a [propaganda] leaflet, not to hide it away; just on the contrary, they have to summon all the Soldiers from the unit, read the leaflet and explain to them that only traitors can write such things; nobody has won a battle by fleeing the battlefield; and, it is not worth, after

so many sacrifices have been made, to leave their position and disgrace themselves, their families and Bulgaria.”⁴⁴

Furthermore, to mitigate the negative effect that the deficiencies in the supply system created for the troops’ morale, General Vazov was very persistent in his demands for additional clothing, supplies, and ammunition. He used every opportunity to request his superiors, even Crown Prince Boris himself, for what he considered was of a significant importance for the morale of his troops.⁴⁵ Thus, by August-September 1918, sufficient quantities of uniforms and boots were distributed to all regiments. “The companies had a different outlook now, since the new uniforms not only changed the outer appearance of the Soldiers, but it also improved their state of mind.”⁴⁶

The reorganization of the 9th Division defense in mid-August had an additional positive impact on the troops’ morale. The exchange of positions among the regiments broke the monotony of trench warfare and contributed to the high fighting spirit of the defenders. Furthermore, this tactical maneuver allowed the division commander to withdraw to the rear one regiment at a time, breaking the constant contact with the enemy. While going through this short period of rest and recuperation, the troops continued to improve the second defensive line of the Doiran main position.⁴⁷

In his book, General Nedev pointed out as the most important factor for the success at Doiran “the high fighting spirit that we constantly maintained and the moral virtues of each and every defender.”⁴⁸ He explained further: “All of us were convinced that our position was impregnable, that failure to use maximum efforts to hold the position would cover our unit with shame, and that as long as we kept our position, Bulgaria would be secure.”⁴⁹

Time

By the beginning of 1916, the Second Bulgarian Army units had started preparing their defensive positions, once it became evident that the Bulgarian High Command had failed in its attempts to convince the German *OHL* to continue their advance further south. The initial reconnaissance and establishment of the first line of defense was initiated at approximately the same time as at the Dobro Pole position. After the Bulgarian Army had been halted at the Greek border, the positions between Vardar and Doiran were occupied by the 2nd Infantry (Thracian) Division, commanded by General Dimitar Geshov. Even though they were not threatened by the Anglo-French troops, which were busy fortifying their own positions around Salonika, the Bulgarian defenders lacked the necessary expertise and construction materiel to achieve significant progress in the engineer improvement of the position.⁵⁰ At the end February 1916, the 2nd Division was replaced by the German 101st and 103rd Divisions of the 4th Reserve Corps, under the overall command of the Eleventh Army of General Galvitz. Over the next couple of months the German troops continued the fortifications of the defensive line, applying the lessons learned at the Western Front.

The importance of this sector for Field Marshal von Mackensen's overall defensive concept urged him to request the redeployment of the 9th Infantry (Pleven) Division from its positions to the east to Doiran in order to reinforce the 4th Corps. However, by mid-August, the German command gradually withdrew almost all of its troops from Doiran, thus leaving the responsibility of the sector between Vardar and Doiran to the 9th Division commander, General Nerezov, with five Bulgarian and one German regiments under his command.⁵¹

Until the Allies' first major offensive in August 1916, the troops at Doiran had an equal amount of time as those at Dobro Pole to prepare their defensive positions. Even though by the time of the attack the position had not been sufficiently fortified yet, the 9th Division and the 2nd Brigade of the 2nd Thracian Division (2-2 Brigade) defeated the Anglo-French attack. In the autumn of 1916, the Bulgarian High Command regrouped the units along the Macedonian Front, while the German *OHL* continued to shift forces towards the Western Front, thereby leaving the sector between the Vardar River and Lake Doiran entirely under the command of General Nerezov and his 9th Division.

The success of the defensive operations at Doiran and the analysis of the lessons learned provided impetus to improve the fortifications, with the efforts focused primarily on the increased depth of the positions and the establishment of shelters for the personnel and the artillery pieces. However, due to the upcoming winter, which brought to a halt the engineer work across the entire front, the major improvement of the Doiran sector started in the spring of 1917. At this point of time, General Vazov assumed command of the 9th Infantry Division and immediately initiated the full range of activities that would lead his organization to success, as described earlier in this chapter. As a result of the reorganization of the defense at Doiran in 1916, the division spent more than two years in the same area of operations, which provided them with sufficient time to familiarize with the strengths and weaknesses of the position. Thus, time as a factor had a similar effect on the 9th Division operations as it had on the 2nd and 3rd Divisions at Dobro Pole. However, it was the soundness of the decisions of the commanders in those sectors and the effectiveness of the use of the time available for the implementation of their plans that was of higher importance for the outcome of the operations there.

Leadership

Commanders' Qualities

The commander at Doiran, Vladimir Vazov, since his early age had the example of his elder brothers Ivan and Georgi, who fought in the Serbian-Bulgarian War of 1885 to protect the reunited Bulgarian Principality. The eldest of his brothers, Ivan, was also one of the greatest Bulgarian novelists and poets and a prominent public figure. He actively participated in political life, supporting the struggle of the Bulgarian people for liberation and national unification to become Minister of Education in 1897.⁵² The second eldest brother, Georgi, participated in the War for National Liberation (1877-1878), the Serbian-Bulgarian War, and the Balkan Wars (1912-1913), reaching the rank of a lieutenant-general and occupying the position of the War Minister in 1913.⁵³ The youngest brother, Boris was a member of the Bulgarian parliament between 1923 and 1931.

When the Serbian-Bulgarian War broke, the 17-year old Vladimir Vazov was determined to join the Bulgarian Army but the draft commission rejected his application. Upon graduation from military school in 1888, Lieutenant Vladimir Vazov was commissioned as a platoon commander in an artillery regiment. Between 1890 and 1902, he occupied positions as a battery commander, section chief, and artillery brigade commander. After additional professional development courses in Russia, Germany, and France, in 1906 Lieutenant-Colonel Vazov was appointed deputy commandant of the recently established Artillery School. During this period of his career, he significantly contributed to the development of new doctrine, field manuals, and instructions for the Bulgarian field artillery.

At the beginning of the First Balkan War in September 1912, Vazov was commander of the 4th Artillery Regiment in the 1st Infantry (Sofia) Division. During the course of the war, Vazov distinguished himself not only as a skilful and experienced artilleryman, but also as a bold and daring commander, leading his men in a charge from the front with a sword in his hand in one of the decisive moments of the battle of Chataldzha.⁵⁴ When Bulgaria entered World War I in 1915, Vazov was an artillery brigade commander in the 5th Infantry (Danube) Division. He took part in the Bulgarian Second Army advance against the Serbian troops in the area of Gnjilane and down the Vardar River valley. On 28 November 1915, Vazov suffered a heavy injury and had to leave the front lines for several months. In March 1916, he was promoted to colonel and assigned the position of a Commander, 1st Infantry Brigade, 5th Division. After the successful defensive operations of his brigade in the autumn of 1916, on 1 March 1917, Vladimir Vazov was appointed commander of the 9th Infantry (Pleven) Division at Doiran.

Immediately after assuming command of his division, General Vazov started continuous reconnaissance tours along the different sectors of the defense, in order to familiarize himself with the positions and their level of fortification, assess the conditions in the trenches, and receive a first-hand impression of his troops. His approach and understanding of the role of the commander becomes evident from his memoirs:

The thorough knowledge of the position down to the tiniest details is of a greatest importance for the appropriate allocation of the troops, the necessary level of development of the fortifications, and the preparation of an impregnable and successful all-round defense as a whole. This could be achieved only through frequent and continuous tours, inspections, and examinations of the positions. The often appearance of the senior commander there has an additional implication; this is, the subordinate commanders are forced to do the same and the Soldiers, by

seeing their highest superiors on the positions sharing the same perils, increase their trust in them.⁵⁵

In order to develop the necessary situational understanding, General Vazov conducted his initial assessment of both the operational environment and the organization under his command. He performed personal reconnaissance of the battlefield and evaluated his subordinate commanders, troops, and terrain. Some of his findings, however, did not match his expectations of the division leadership capabilities, their level of commitment, and determination to accomplish the mission of the division: organize effective and cohesive defense in order to prevent allied penetration of the Doiran position.

On one occasion, General Vazov found out that one of his brigade commanders was not familiar with his unit's position and had difficulty answering General Vazov's questions, frequently turning to his subordinates for support. Finally, the brigade commander admitted that, even though he had been in command for more than a year, he never had come that far to the flank of his position. In addition to his obvious lack of situational awareness, the brigade commander complained to General Vazov in front of his subordinates that his position was not strong enough and he did not have sufficient manpower to defend it. General Vazov, whose constant theme to the Soldiers and the junior commanders was that the Doiran position was strong enough and that they had the strength to defeat the enemy, provided they put enough efforts to fortify it, was frustrated. Thus, the very next day, he requested of the First Army commander that "this brigade commander who carried the defeat in his heart" be relieved.⁵⁶

General Vazov often displayed the character of a demanding and relentless leader in terms of training, preparation, and adherence to the regulations in his division. Being

aware of the importance of the commander in the battle, he directed his staff and subordinate regimental commanders to organize and conduct a series of training courses for their junior commanders, including non-commissioned officers and lower enlisted on key positions within the infantry and artillery units.⁵⁷ Furthermore, General Vazov widely encouraged his subordinate commanders' initiative, personal contact with their subordinates, and the sharing of the challenges that the harsh conditions in the Macedonian mountains presented to their troops. While some of the commanders at Dobro Pole rarely even visited their units' positions, through personal example General Vazov stimulated the development of personal relationships and close interaction between commanders at all levels and their subordinates. This created positive environment in his organization and helped him form a cohesive unit, which was a prerequisite for success. He provided freedom of action for his subordinate commanders, relying on their experience and initiative, which further increased their confidence and the trust of the Soldiers in their leaders' capabilities.⁵⁸

As a result of the approach he applied towards his brigade and regiment commanders and his junior leaders, General Vazov ensured their commitment and increase the motivation the troops under his command. He regularly invited junior officers and non-commissioned officer to lunch, discussing any pertinent issues with them. He even organized a celebration on the occasion of the Bulgarian Army Day,⁵⁹ while the British artillery was bombarding the security area of the division defensive positions as part of their attrition strategy against the Bulgarian positions. During the celebration, General Vazov decorated the ones that had distinguished themselves in

earlier battles, had lunch with them, and then they went back to the trenches with a new fighting spirit.⁶⁰

General Vazov not only sought to develop his subordinate leaders but also improve his Soldiers' well-being and level of protection. He constantly pressured his superiors to provide the necessary food, clothing, and ammunition for his troops. In one occasion, he received specific directions signed by the First Army commander, General Geshov, to reduce the number of training exercises with his artillery units in order to spare ammunition. The 9th Division Commander immediately submitted a report in response to the new instructions, justifying the increased ammunition expenditure with the need to achieve rapid responsiveness of his division's defensive artillery fire and adequate level of coordination with the infantry units' maneuver, especially during counterattacks. He stated to his superiors in the report: "Indeed, in these cases we spend plenty of shells, sometimes with no results, but this is inevitable if we want to spare the blood of the Bulgarian Soldiers . . . this is how I understand the role of the artillery and, as long as I have the honor to command the 9th Division, this is how I intend to employ it in combat."⁶¹ Having already gained the confidence and trust of his commanders, General Vazov was given permission by General Geshov to continue with the training of his artillery units.

Besides the efforts of the 9th Division commander and his staff to achieve high standards of performance of the division's units and improve the harsh living conditions they had to withstand in the Macedonian mountains, General Vazov often demonstrated personal care for his people. He regularly visited them in the trenches to instill confidence in them or in the division field hospitals to encourage the wounded. General

Vazov wrote in his diary: “I wonder what my wife would say if she finds out that I have shared the whole box of baklava with the wounded in 1-9 [Brigade] hospital, without eating a single piece of it.”⁶²

As an experienced commander, General Vazov was aware of the importance of maintaining the fighting spirit of his subordinates in the course of the battle. At the end of the first combat day of the Entente offensive on 18 September 1918, after the British troops were pushed back to their initial assault positions by the Bulgarian defenders at Doiran, the division commander sent out an acknowledgment message to his commanders and troops. General Nedev recalled in his memoirs:

In the very moment, when . . . General Vazov became certain that the fighting had been won, with a calm and satisfied expression on his face sat outside his command post on a stone, next to the heliograph used to distribute new orders and receive reports and wrote on a piece of paper on his knee the following message to [each of] the brigade commanders: “I congratulate you and the heroes infantrymen, artillerymen and all other ranks of your brigade for their valor in defeating the vigorous attack of the numerous enemy. I have full confidence that in the future you will successfully defend your position with the same bravery. I express my sincere commendation to all ranks in your brigade.”⁶³

Despite the confidence he had in his subordinate commanders’ qualities, the strength of his division’s position, and the commitment of his troops, as any military commander, General Vazov experienced moments of hesitation and uncertainty of the decisions he had to make in the chaos and tension of the battle. In the initial hours of the allied offensive on 18 September, the 9th Division Commander received a series of increasingly alarming reports from the 1-9 Brigade Commander, indicating an unexpectedly swift advance of the Greek Seres Division at the left flank of the division’s defensive area. Even though the reports were not complete and it was hard for him to make an informed assessment of the situation, the desperate requests for artillery support

and reserves coming from this sector of the front led General Vazov to the conclusion that the enemy had achieved a breakthrough, which given the duration of the fight and the strength of the position was initially considered almost impossible.

Thus, overwhelmed by the vision of the potential disaster and his possible dishonor as a commander, for an instant General Vazov thought of committing suicide, rather than having to bear the shame of such a rapid defeat. However, he quickly came over the dilemma he was facing. The commander at Doiran found the moral courage to accept possible defeat and, if necessary, make a decision to withdraw his troops from the first line positions, thereby bringing disgrace to himself in the eyes of his superiors, but fulfilling his duty to preserve the lives of his men by leading them through the confusion of the fight until its very end.

Once General Vazov made up his mind, he promptly took control of the situation, giving directions to his staff and subordinate commanders to shift artillery fires and dispatch reserves to the most threatened sectors. As it would turn out later, the reports of the 1-9 Brigade Commander were exaggerated, due to his incomplete assessment of the situation, lack of knowledge of his troops' exact disposition and combat effectiveness, and limited information about the adversary's activities.⁶⁴

In this endeavor, General Vazov had also the support of his superior, the First Army commander, General Nerezov. A former commander of the 9th Infantry Division and a defender of the Doiran position in the earlier stages of the campaign, General Nerezov provided freedom of action, clear guidance, and expertise to his subordinate commanders. General Dieterich provided the assessment of the German command on the First Army's leadership. "The capable commander [of the Bulgarian First Army] General

Nerezov . . . was dedicated with a full comprehension to the preparation and care for his troops and was able to create for his divisions sufficient depth [of the defense] by designating reserves.”⁶⁵ Similar to General Vazov, the First Army commander could often be seen at the front lines at the height of the battle, assessing the situation, giving directions to his subordinates, or just cheering up the defenders.

A platoon commander in the 33rd Infantry Regiment, defending the most critical sector of the 9th Division positions, described his impressions when, during the first day of the Allies ground offensive, General Nerezov went to the front line to greet the troops with the “glorious victory they have won,” while still under enemy fire. “This personal example . . . raised even more the morale of the defenders-heroes of Cerber because they could see with their own eye that among them was their senior commander who would not leave them alone.”⁶⁶

Conduct of the Operation

On 15 September 1918, the Allied troops achieved the breakthrough at Dobro Pole, which was the trigger for the attack against the Bulgarian positions between Vardar and Doiran to the east. The British offensive against the 9th Infantry and Mountain Divisions started on 16 September 1918 with a massive artillery bombardment. At that time, General Vazov was conducting his regular inspection of the division’s main defensive positions. Even though the Bulgarian High Command did not anticipate a major Entente offensive against Doiran, based on his personal observations and the analysis of the information received, General Vazov concluded that the British would most likely launch their attack no later than the night of 17 September.⁶⁷ He ordered full readiness of the division and gave directions to his artillery commanders to concentrate

their fire against the enemy forward trench lines and most likely attack positions and avenues of approach, in other words, “carry out the activities they have been training for and perfecting so long.”⁶⁸ Having made his initial assessment of the situation and given directions to his subordinates, the division commander went forward to the main defensive position to observe the artillery duel. His presence among the combat units was an additional major motivator for the troops--they greeted their commander with cries “Hurray!” and “For Bulgaria!”⁶⁹

During the course of the offensive, the Allies sought to achieve operational surprise in several directions. The first one was to pin down the attention of the German army group command at Dobro Pole, as the sector of their main effort, thereby lowering the vigilance of the defenders at Doiran. Another element of surprise was the employment of chemical warfare assets against the Doiran positions for the first time on the Macedonian Front. A British intelligence officer wrote in his memoirs: “There was the chance of surprise effecting success in the British sector, for we were for the first time in the Balkans bombarding with gas shells. The Bulgars' gas masks were known to be old, and might be useless, and his anti-gas drill might break down.”⁷⁰ The nine gas attacks of the night of 17-18 September, however, did not achieve the desired effect. The division command had equipped all units with gas masks and had conducted the necessary training to ensure the troops were prepared to operate in such an environment. Nedev reveals the reason why the British gas attacks achieved no effect at Doiran: “there was something stronger than the gas. It was the training of the units and the determination of the fighters not to abandon their positions at any cost.”⁷¹

A third potential area for the British to achieve surprise was the disruption of the 9th Division's command and control system. Even though the division command post, located in the vicinity of the village Furka, had not been under enemy aerial and artillery bombardment for a long period of time prior to the offensive, General Vazov directed the establishment of an alternative command post in the vicinity of Mount Furka. Thus, when the division command post fell under the fire of an entire British artillery battery in the early hours on 18 September, the staff could rapidly occupy the alternative command post and reestablish the communications not only with its subordinate commands, but also with the army headquarters and its neighbors. General Nedev further described the Allies' futile attempt to paralyze the division command and control: "The [division] command did not cease to influence the battle and control the rear for a single moment."⁷²

At 05:00 on 18 September 1918, the Allies launched their ground assault between Vardar and Doiran. The XII Corps attacked simultaneously the two flanks of the 9th (Pleven) Division. After more than an hour and a half of heavy fighting, the 26th British Division succeeded in seizing only the 57th Infantry Regiment's security outposts. The Bulgarian command responded with an annihilating artillery fire and, after a decisive counterattack, the 57th Regiment was able to regain control over the security outposts (see figure 7).⁷³ Meanwhile, the 9th Division's forward defensive line to the west was under the attack of the Greek Seres Division, supported by the 83-28 British Brigade. Even though the Greek and British troops significantly outnumbered the two Bulgarian battalions (of the 17th and 58th Regiments) defending the position, it was not until 0720 that they seized it. The forward defensive line had fulfilled its purpose: the Allies

suffered a great number of casualties, their initial stroke was disrupted, and the momentum of their attack was significantly reduced.⁷⁴

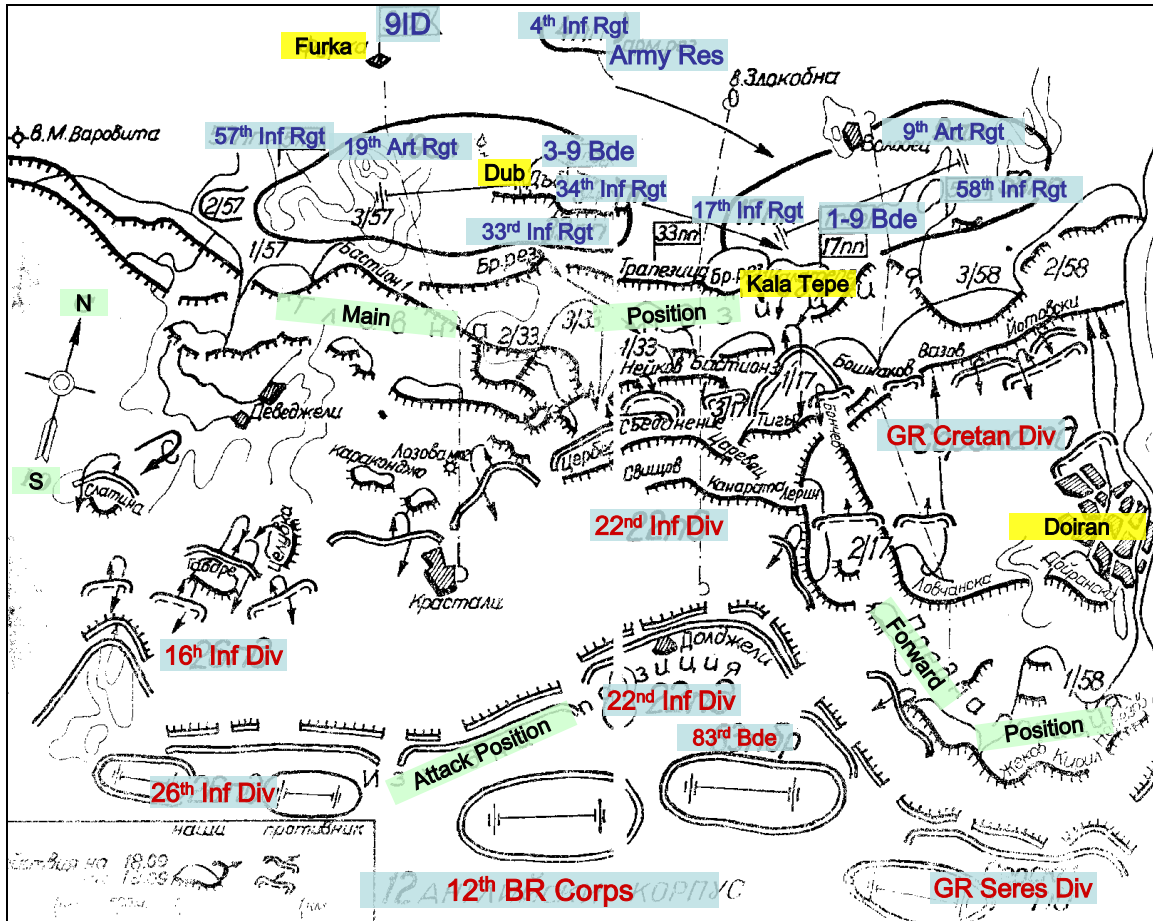


Figure 7. The 9th Infantry (Pleven) Division Operations, 18-19 September 1918
Source: Asen Karaivanov, "Otbranskata poziciya prez esenta na 1918,"
Voенно-istoricheski sbornik (Book 2 1988).

In the center, the 33rd Regiment occupied the most important sector of the 9th Division defense--Mount Dub. If the British were able to seize it, this would potentially lead to a collapse of the whole defense. Therefore, General Milne attacked this sector

with nearly four regiments. While the 26th British and the Seres Greek Divisions were engaged with the Bulgarian forward elements on the flanks, the 22nd British Division, augmented by one Greek regiment, succeeded in taking control of the first couple of trench lines in the center of the defense within an hour. Due to the significant depth of the position, however, the allied troops were not able to penetrate the entire main defensive area of the 9th Division. Again, the captured positions were put under the intensive fire of the Bulgarian artillery in order to shape the counterattack that followed. After the commitment of the 3-9 Brigade's reserve, the Allies were pushed back and by 10:00 the Bulgarian troops had regained control over their lost positions.⁷⁵

A British participant in the events that day described the effect that the Doiran defensive system had upon the attacking troops: "a remnant of this undaunted infantry fought its way over the first and second lines of trenches—if indeed the term 'line' can be applied to a highly complicated and irregular system of defence, taking full advantage of every fold or contortion of the ground."⁷⁶

The 17th Infantry Regiment's positions were adjacent to the 33rd Regiment's ones to the east. After seizing the forward line of defense on the eastern flank, the British and the Greek troops pushed forward in an attempt to penetrate the main defensive line in this sector. Here, they were able to take temporary control only of the first two rows of trenches, reaching just southwest of Mount Kala Tepe. In the close engagement that followed, the defenders succeeded in pushing back the allied troops into a retreat and, with the support of the battalion-level reserves, restored the integrity of the main defensive line.⁷⁷ The battle in the 58th Regiment's sector unfolded in a similar fashion. After the initial success of the assault, the Greek Seres Division seized the first line of the

main defensive position. Shortly thereafter, the 1-9 Brigade Commander committed his reserve and, in coordination with the fires of the 9th Artillery Regiment, by 09:30 the Bulgarian troops recaptured their first line positions.⁷⁸

Thus, by noon on 18 September, the Allies' offensive across the entire Doiran front was defeated. The British 22nd Division had its 67th Brigade almost completely annihilated--out of the three battalions, only 5 officers and 195 troops survived.⁷⁹ The rest of the brigades suffered heavy losses, too. This is how the battle for Dub looked like from British perspective: "By this time the battle of the 'Pips' was a mere confusion of massacre, noise and futile bravery. Nearly all the men of the first two battalions were lying dead or wounded on the hillside."⁸⁰ Despite the limited success of the Greek Seres Division in the area of Doiran Town, due to the large amount of casualties and lack of significant gains as a result of the XII Corps offensive, the allied troops were forced to withdraw to their initial assault positions.⁸¹

The artillery fires against the Bulgarian positions, however, continued throughout the night, rendering little opportunity for the defenders to rest or repair the fortifications. After conducting consolidation of his troops, General Milne renewed the attack shortly before 04:00 on the 19 September, after a massive artillery barrage, to include gas shells. His decisive operation, again, was directed against the 33rd Regiment, in an attempt to penetrate the 9th Division's positions in this sector and seize Mount Dub, thereby disintegrating the Bulgarian defense. For five hours, none of the belligerents was able to retain control of the first line of the main defensive position. The appropriate allocation of reserves by General Vazov, which facilitated their timely employment against the most

critical sectors of the defense in coordination with fire maneuver, was the key to success of the Doiran defenders in the second day of the offensive.⁸²

By 09:00 on 19 September, the fight was almost over. Having suffered significant losses themselves (454 dead, 857 wounded, and 1209 missing), the defenders of the 9th Infantry Division inflicted such heavy casualties on the allied troops (more than 11,673 dead and wounded) that they were no longer combat effective to conduct offensive operations.⁸³ The assessment of the casualties as a result of the battle from British perspective is slightly different: “We had now sustained 3,871 casualties in the Doiran battle. Our troops were incapable of any further effort. A terrible high proportion had been lost or disabled.”⁸⁴ Regardless of the exact number of casualties, it was beyond any doubt that the British Salonika Army had culminated after the second day of the fight. Thus, when the Bulgarian troops had to abandon their positions on 20 September due to the Allies’ breakthrough at Dobro Pole, they were not pursued by the British. This created favorable conditions for an unopposed withdrawal of the First Army units towards the Bulgarian border and prevented the occupation of the country by the Serbian and Greek armies, a situation which would have had even more devastating results for Bulgaria when the armistice was signed.

¹Zafirov, “Otbranata pri Doiran,” 5.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., 12.

⁴Vladimir Vazov, *Zhivotopisni belezhki* (Sofia: Sv. Georgi Pobedonosec, 1992), 30.

⁵Zafirov, “Otbranata pri Doiran,” 7.

- ⁶Vazov, *Zhivotopisni belezhki*, 32.
- ⁷Ibid., 86.
- ⁸Karaivanov, "Otbranata na Doiranskata poziciya prez esenta na 1918," 122.
- ⁹Ibid., 123.
- ¹⁰Nedev, *Doiranskata epopeya*, 174-175.
- ¹¹Ibid., 176.
- ¹²Karaivanov, "Otbranata na Doiranskata poziciya prez esenta na 1918," 120.
- ¹³Ibid.
- ¹⁴Famili Memorabilia, "Salonika and Macedonia 1916-1918," http://memorabilia.homestead.com/files/Salonika_and_Macedonia_1916_18.htm (accessed 6 April 2012).
- ¹⁵A. M. Woodward, "Memoires Of A Side-Show--Macedonia, 1918," <http://www.yrc.org.uk/ycweb/index.php/journal/vols1-5/volume5/no-15-1922/254-v5n15p20> (accessed 6 April 2012).
- ¹⁶Karaivanov, "Otbranata na Doiranskata poziciya prez esenta na 1918," 121.
- ¹⁷Nedev, *Doiranskata epopeya*, 246.
- ¹⁸Ellis and Cox, *The World War One Databook*, 202.
- ¹⁹Karaivanov, "Otbranata na Doiranskata poziciya prez esenta na 1918," 124.
- ²⁰Nedev, *Doiranskata epopeya*, 175-176.
- ²¹Karaivanov, "Otbranata na Doiranskata poziciya prez esenta na 1918," 124.
- ²²Ibid., 137.
- ²³Nedev, *Doiranskata epopeya*, 96.
- ²⁴Ibid., 96-97.
- ²⁵Petko Peev, *Ot Pleven prez Nish do Doiran* (Sofia: Stopansko razvitie, 1932), 178.
- ²⁶Vazov, *Zhivotopisni belezhki*, 18-21.
- ²⁷Zafirov, "Otbranata pri Doiran," 9.

²⁸Nedev, *Doiranskata epopeya*, 132-138. Nedev provides a comprehensive description of the defensive positions at Doiran and detailed information on the type of fortifications there.

²⁹Zafirov, "Otbranata pri Doiran," 9.

³⁰Vazov, *Zhivotopisni belezhki*, 12.

³¹Nedev, *Doiranskata epopeya*, 176-179.

³²*Ibid.*, 81-82.

³³*Ibid.*, 92.

³⁴Vazov, *Zhivotopisni belezhki*, 99.

³⁵Peev, *Ot Pleven prez Nish do Doiran*, 149.

³⁶Nedev, *Doiranskata epopeya*, 85.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 84.

³⁸Peev, *Ot Pleven prez Nish do Doiran*, 149.

³⁹Nedev, *Doiranskata epopeya*, 85.

⁴⁰Peev, *Ot Pleven prez Nish do Doiran*, 149.

⁴¹Zafirov, "Otbranata pri Doiran," 13.

⁴²Nedev, *Doiranskata epopeya*, 175-176.

⁴³Vazov, *Zhivotopisni belezhki*, 68.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 78.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 79.

⁴⁶Nedev, *Doiranskata epopeya*, 190.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 239.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 29-33.

- ⁵¹Ibid., 38.
- ⁵²Milena Tzaneva, “Ivan Vazov, Biografichni belezhki,” <http://www.slovo.bg/showbio.php3?ID=14> (accessed 4 February 2012).
- ⁵³Petra Tasheva, “Golyamata familiya Vazovi,” <http://www.referati.org/golqmata-familiq-vazovi/47570/ref/p2#> (accessed 4 February 2012).
- ⁵⁴Vazov, *Zhivotopisni belezhki*, 6-9.
- ⁵⁵Ibid., 18-19.
- ⁵⁶Ibid., 19.
- ⁵⁷Ibid., 130-131.
- ⁵⁸Karaivanov, “Otbranata na Doiranskata poziciya prez esenta na 1918,” 135-136.
- ⁵⁹Saint George’s day, which is celebrated on 6 May.
- ⁶⁰Nedev, *Doiranskata epopeya*, 240.
- ⁶¹Vazov, *Zhivotopisni belezhki*, 63.
- ⁶²Ibid., 30.
- ⁶³Nedev, *Doiranskata epopeya*, 235.
- ⁶⁴Vazov, *Zhivotopisni belezhki*, 101-103.
- ⁶⁵Dieterich, “Krayat na svetovната voina na Makedonskiya front,” 44.
- ⁶⁶Liuben Leshtov, *Doiranskata epopeya: Boyat za visochina Dub* (Sofia: Boina biblioteka, 1927), 30.
- ⁶⁷Nedev, *Doiranskata epopeya*, 198.
- ⁶⁸Ibid., 197.
- ⁶⁹Ibid., 198.
- ⁷⁰Woodward, “Memoires of A Side-Show--Macedonia, 1918.”
- ⁷¹Nedev, *Doiranskata epopeya*, 200.
- ⁷²Ibid., 201-202.
- ⁷³Ibid., 203-204.

⁷⁴Ibid., 212-213.

⁷⁵Ibid., 205-208.

⁷⁶Famili Memorabilia, "Salonika and Macedonia 1916-1918."

⁷⁷Nedev, Doiranskata epopeya, 213-215.

⁷⁸Ibid., 216.

⁷⁹Karaivanov, "Otbranata na Doiranskata poziciya prez esenta na 1918," 133.

⁸⁰Famili Memorabilia, "Salonika and Macedonia 1916-1918."

⁸¹Palmer, "Defeat of Bulgaria: The Central Powers Begin to Crack," 2984.

⁸²Karaivanov, "Otbranata na Doiranskata poziciya prez esenta na 1918," 133-134.

⁸³Ibid., 134. The number of casualties given by Karaivanov coincides with the figures provided by Nedev, whose book is the most extensive work on the operations at Doiran. According to him, these assessments were based on the information acquired from Entente officers, most likely prisoners of war. Furthermore, as a participants in the events in 1918, Nedev stated that only the dead bodies of the British and Greek troops laying in the Bulgarian positions counted more than 6,500. See Nedev, Doiranskata epopeya, 229. However, the official statistics of the British Army casualties at Salonika in September 1918 is 4,470 dead, wounded, and missing. See The War Office, *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War, 1914-1920* (March 1920), 290-291.

⁸⁴Famili Memorabilia, "Salonika and Macedonia 1916-1918." These figures are provided by a participants in the 1918 allied offensive at Doiran, a member of the 28th British Division staff. However, the official statistics of the British Army casualties at Salonika in September 1918 is 4,470 dead, wounded, and missing. See The War Office, *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War, 1914-1920*, 290-291. Either way, these numbers leave too great proportion of casualties among the Greek and French troops participating in the battle. Thus, the exact number of casualties from either side should be a subject of a more extensive research. However, its relevance to the thesis does not require further studying.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

When preparing officers, we were extremely zealous in stirring their desire towards the noble work of the trainer, the mentor, and the leader. The starting points of all our lectures were: forget about yourself; adopt an ideal; take a close look at your deeds and correct them immediately, if wrong; be a rigid master of your behavior; try to comprehend the importance of the victory of your will . . .

Work with reason, but most importantly with your heart; protect, respect and hold the warrior firmly in your hands; bring up honest, brave, and persevering men of initiative; make quick and firm decisions; act with determination and in a selfless manner.

—Col Boris Drangov, *Pomni voinata*

The history of armed conflict has shown that success in war depends on the ability of the senior political and military leadership to retain control over the flow of events by creating and maintaining the necessary balance between the passion and endurance of the population, the skills and courage of the army under their command, and the political aims of the government.¹ This, in the long term, is what makes them victorious against their adversary. Much to the regret of the Bulgarian government, the validity of the Clausewitz's concept was proven once again after the Bulgarian involvement in World War I. The depleted resources, foundering economy, and decreased popular support to a great extent predetermined the strategic inability of the Bulgarian government to sustain its military efforts in such a prolonged engagement. In addition, the Bulgarian Army had to operate on the Macedonian Front in a situation of ever increasing uncertainty and friction because of the insufficient equipment and inadequate logistic support, continuous withdrawal of their German allies towards the Western Front, and lack of viable political

guidance from the government, which significantly reduced the probability of military victory. Thus, the political, military, and social misbalance, which could not be compensated by the qualities of the Bulgarian troops alone, significantly affected the tactical level operations of the Bulgarian Army in Macedonia in 1918.

Conclusions

The tactical level factors that determined the outcome of the Bulgarian Army operations at Dobro Pole and Doiran in the autumn of 1918 were the organization and preparation of the defensive positions, the commitment and morale of the troops, and the commanders' leadership qualities. Above all other factors, the key to the victory at Doiran was General Vazov's ability to motivate his troops, organize sound defensive preparations, and, on the day of battle, exercise effective tactical command.

Taking into consideration all relevant factors that influenced the flow of events in the autumn of 1918, the author of this thesis sought to present the necessary evidence to support the thesis statement, which suggested that leadership was the most significant element of the Bulgarian Army operations on the Macedonian Front. In order to achieve that end, the author presented the mission variables (mission, enemy, terrain, troops, and time) as controlled independent variables, which created similar effect in the two case studies and examined commanders' leadership as the variable that shaped the outcome of the two operations, which as the dependent variable differed in the two areas. The leadership analysis encompassed not only the core leadership competencies of lead, develop, and achieve but also the ability of the senior commanders at Dobro Pole and Doiran to gain situational understanding and efficiently plan and prepare for mission

execution by interpreting the mission variables and assessing the effect they would have on the conduct of their defensive operations.

Mission

Prior to the major Entente offensive in 1918, all Bulgarian units at the Macedonian Front shared the same task: to defend their position, denying Allies' penetration and preventing possible occupation of Bulgaria. Due to depleted resources, overstretched defensive lines, and the decreasing level of morale of the troops in the trenches, the perception among the military and political leadership was that the war-weary Bulgarian Army lacked the capabilities to conduct a large-scale offensive operation. Thus, the Bulgarian and German commands adopted a passive defense approach, which allowed the Entente Salonika Army to widely conduct aerial and ground reconnaissance, maneuver its forces into favorable positions across the Greek border, and prepare for decisive offensive operations along the entire Macedonian Front.

Even though the leadership at Dobro Pole, to include the Bulgarian division commanders, the German headquarters of the LXI Corps, the Eleventh Army, and the Army Group von Scholtz, realized the strategic importance of this part of the defense for the overall success of the campaign, they did not develop a coherent plan to coordinate the efforts of all units in the threatened sector. This became evident in the first days of the allied offensive, when the defending troops were destroyed piecemeal by the French and Greek forces, as no preplanned operational level counterattack aimed to restore the integrity of the defense existed and the withdrawing units had to be reorganized in the very course of the battle. Furthermore, the allocation of resources, in particular the reserves and the artillery guns, was not organized in a manner that could ensure timely

reaction to all possible contingencies, which an allied included a penetration at Bitola (Monastir), limited-objectives attack against Dobro Pole, or penetration between Sokol and Veternik, followed by an exploitation towards the Vardar River valley.

The plan for the defense of Doiran, on the other hand, was developed after General Vazov analyzed the battles that had taken place earlier in the war in a manner that not only ensured accomplishment of the mission, but also envisioned as a possible sequel the conduct of a counteroffensive against the Entente troops in the area of Salonika as part of his higher headquarters' plan. Despite the defensive approach that his division had to adopt, General Vazov preserved the offensive mindset of his troops. He prepared them for active defense, ensured freedom of movement for his subordinate commanders and provided them with sufficient resources for counterattacks and indirect fire support. Furthermore, at any moment of the operation his plans were coordinated with the neighboring units--the Mountain Division to the west and the 1-11 Brigade to the east. In addition, the effective reorganization of the defense at Doiran as part of General Vazov's plan further contributed to the successful completion of the mission.

Enemy

Even though the composition and strength of the adversary the commanders at Dobro Pole and Doiran were facing was slightly different, the type of equipment and the overall level of training, experience, and morale of the allied troops was similar in the two areas of operations. The force ratio in infantry units was also comparable. According to different authors, it varied between 2.5:1 and 3:1 in favor of the Entente, and in the sectors of the main effort for both operations it was 3:1. The advantage in number of artillery pieces of the 9th Division at Doiran, as compared to the units at Dobro Pole, was

largely a result of the appropriate grouping of the artillery units by the First Army commander and the efficient organization of indirect fire support by General Vazov in his division's sector. On the other hand, the concentration of guns by General d'Esperey on his main effort at Dobro Pole found no adequate response from the Eleventh Army and Army Group von Scholtz.

The Serbian troops that the defenders at Dobro Pole faced were experienced and traditionally fought well in mountainous terrain. In addition, the Serbian Army had been trained, equipped, and mentored by the French Army over the three-year period that followed their defeat by the joint Bulgarian, German, and Austro-Hungarian forces in 1915, which significantly improved their level of performance. Even though by 1918 the morale of the Serbian troops had significantly decreased after the earlier futile attempts of the Entente to penetrate the Macedonian Front, on the eve of the offensive their spirit and level of motivation had risen due to the perspective of winning a decisive engagement which could open for them the way for liberation of their homeland. Whether their motivation would have lasted long enough to attain their objective, provided they had not achieved initial success in the first two days of the offensive, is a matter of debate. The French colonial troops, even though in a supporting role to the Serbian Army, brought expertise and ensured precise execution of General d'Esperey's plan.

At Doiran, in addition to the traditional Balkan foes, the Greeks, who were also trained and equipped by the French, the 9th Division had to fight against British Regular Army units. The motivation for the Serbian forces was not the same for the Greek troops. Nevertheless, the ambitions of the Greek government to achieve any sort of victory against the Central Powers in Macedonia that would justify their aspirations for some of

the disputed territories there once the war was over, was a strong enough motivator for the Greek Army at Doiran. In addition, the fighting spirit of the Greek troops was on the rise after their limited success against the Bulgarian Army earlier the same year.²

Even though the British Army troops fought far from their homeland, their desire to end the long war was no less a motivation than that of the rest of the troops at the Macedonian Front. The high number of casualties among the Allies as a result of the 18 and 19 September attacks is clear enough evidence of the fighting spirit of the British units at Doiran. An eyewitness of the September 1918 fight was impressed by the courage and determination of one of the 22nd British Division's battalions: "No feat of arms can ever surpass the glorious bravery of those Welshmen."³ General Milne summarized the effort of his troops and explained the motivation that drove them towards the heavily fortified defensive lines of the Doiran position: "Rather than miss the opportunity for which they had waited three years, officers and men remained in the ranks till often they dropped from sheer exhaustion."⁴

Each of the belligerent armies along the Macedonian Front was familiar with their adversaries' strengths and weaknesses, the tactics they employed, and their fighting spirit, after having been engaged with each other for more than two and a half years. Both General d'Esperey's and General Milne's plans were well developed, based on their knowledge of the terrain and organization of the Bulgarian defense in the respective sectors, and sought to achieve operational surprise. Similar to General d'Esperey's concept of operations at Dobro Pole, the British Salonika Army Commander employed a combination of heavy artillery fire, infantry maneuver on the flanks, and exploitation in the direction of his main effort. However, due to the extensive fortifications, the Allies'

commander at Doiran was not able to achieve the same devastating effects of the artillery fire as d'Esperey did further west. Nevertheless, the overall effect of the enemy forces' composition, disposition, and strength on the outcome of the two operations was similar in each of the cases.

What made the difference, however, was the depth of the analysis of these capabilities, the assessment of the enemy's likely intent, and the organization and conduct of the defensive operations by the Bulgarian commanders in manner that allowed them to mitigate the advantages of their adversary and enhance the effect of their own forces' capabilities. Even though the Allies had not previously conducted such a large-scale offensive in the area of Dobro Pole, multiple indicators suggested that such an attack had to be expected in the autumn of 1918. The concealed movement of troops and concentration of artillery units, which did not remain undetected by the troops at Dobro Pole, did not lead to any significant changes in the defensive concept of the commanders in this sector. Both the German and Bulgarian commands assessed the pending allied attack as a limited-objective operation, aimed at seizing the key terrain in the area of Dobro Pole, with no significant strategic impact on the overall campaign.

Even though General d'Esperey conducted a feint against the Bulgarian defenses at Bitola, which initially diverted the army group reserve, both the Bulgarian High Command and the German *OHL* expected the Entente major thrust at Dobro Pole. However, the false assumption they were making about the Allies' objective in this operation, which was never questioned by the division commanders who had fairly good intelligence, caught them unprepared to react to their adversary's course of action. Nevertheless, a more detailed analysis of the unsuccessful Franco-British attempts for a

decisive breakthrough at Doiran towards the Vardar River valley in 1916 and 1917 should have provided them with clearer understanding of General d'Esperey's real intent, should he decide to launch a major offensive further west in order to avoid the well-fortified defenses of Doiran.

General Milne's attack at Doiran, on the other hand, stood a much greater chance to achieve operational surprise, provided the First Army and the 9th Division commanders misjudged their adversary's intent. Knowledge of the Allies' earlier unsuccessful offensive operations against the Bulgarian defensive positions between Vardar and Doiran, coupled with the information about the massing of Entente troops in the area of Morihovsko, might have led Generals Nerezov and Vazov to conclude that a massive attack in their sector was unlikely. However, General Vazov's analysis of the previous engagements helped him better understand his adversary's operational approach, the shortfalls in the organization of his defense, and the limitations of the position his division occupied. Thus, he was able to direct his staff and subordinate commanders to plan, prepare for, and execute the operation in a manner that would mitigate the unfavorable conditions he had identified. Furthermore, the division commander's constant presence at the front line and personal observation of the battlefield allowed him to develop a realistic situational understanding and follow the development of the British offensive. This understanding precluded the achievement of surprise by General Milne against the Bulgarian positions at Doiran.

Terrain

As described in the main body of this thesis, the characteristics of the terrain favored the defenders at both locations. The Mounts Sokol and Veternik, and especially

the ridgeline north of Dobro Pole, if appropriately integrated into the defense, could create an almost impregnable position, hard to overcome even by the Serbian troops who were experienced in mountainous warfare. Likewise, the Mounts Dub and Kala Tepe, and Furka to the rear created an excellent opportunity for the establishment of strong points, which constituted the bases of the defense at Doiran.

The ground in both areas of operations, however, had notable disadvantages and presented certain challenges for the defending troops. The commanders' approach for mitigating the shortfalls of their positions and making maximum use of the opportunities they offered was one of the prerequisites for failure in the first occasion and success in the latter. In other words, the ability of the commanders to visualize how their defenses had to be organized in order to achieve success, after assessing the environment and analyzing their troops' performance and enemy tactics in previous engagements, was one of the major factors that determined the outcome of the Bulgarian Army operations at Dobro Pole and Doiran.

While the division and brigade commanders at Dobro Pole had difficulties identifying the most appropriate location for their main defensive positions, at Doiran General Vazov (and General Nerezov before him) developed their defense with two main positions, a forward position, and a system of combat outposts. At the main position, the strong points were linked by a system of trenches, reaching the greatest depth at the likely enemy avenues of approach and making best use of the characteristics of the terrain. The forward position, established at the main avenue of approach along the western edge of Lake Doiran, played a crucial role during the battle, slowing down the momentum of the allied assault and causing maximum attrition to the British and Greek troops. Finally,

despite the serious challenges that the mountainous terrain presented to the defenders, the improved fortification of the positions significantly increased the level of protection and survivability of the Bulgarian infantry troops and artillery units.

Similar to Doiran, the restricted terrain at Dobro Pole, Sokol, and Veternik provided excellent conditions for the establishment of a forward position, with the main defensive line running further north along the Kozjak Mountain, as some of the regiment commanders' analysis suggested. However, the division commanders in this sector never took the initiative or proposed to their superiors a plan to improve the organization of the defense and withdraw their units to a position where their operations would stand a much greater chance for success. Neither the 2nd and 3rd Division commanders nor the LXI Corps and the Eleventh Army took the necessary measures to fill the gap between the two divisions, which was formed due to the characteristics of the terrain. These shortfalls created an opportunity for a swift advance by the Serbian and French troops through the seemingly impregnable mountain ridges between Dobro Pole and Veternik. Thus, not the terrain itself, but the development of the defensive system, organized to enhance the natural features and provide maximum protection to the force was the first major factors that contributed to the Bulgarian victory at Doiran.

Troops

The composition and strength of the troops in both areas of operations also appears to be a roughly equal factor. The units at the two locations had been in the trenches of the Macedonian Front since its establishment at the end of 1915 and the beginning of 1916. The frontage they had to defend against the Allies' main effort was also of similar width in both sectors. Furthermore, their level of training, combat

experience, equipment, and the availability of resources did not differ significantly as well. The commanders in both areas of operations conducted training of their troops with different intensity on certain drills, like the procedures to counter the use of gas shells by their adversary. However, General Vazov went beyond the individual and small unit training. Through regular rehearsals based on his guidance, his staff and subordinate commanders synchronized the interaction between machine-gunners, grenade-throwers, artillery fire and the infantry counterattacks.

The commanders in both locations, especially the ones at the tactical levels up to battalion and brigade, made their best efforts to maintain the morale, combat spirit, and cohesion of their units. Leave schedules, units' rotation at the main defensive line, and morale and welfare activities were among some of the practices employed by the commanders at Dobro Pole and Doiran. Nevertheless, single cases of desertion and mutiny among the troops started to appear towards the end of the campaign. War weariness, the adversary's propaganda, and the worsening situation back home gradually decreased the fighting spirit of the Bulgarian Soldiers.

The approach of some of the Bulgarian senior commanders further contributed to the growing dissatisfaction among the troops and lack of situational awareness among the military leadership. According to Stanchev, some commanders at the echelons above his 30th Regiment (1-8 Brigade and 2nd Infantry Division) were not familiar with their units' strengths and capabilities, did not encourage the initiative of their subordinate commanders, and kept the higher commands uninformed about their troops' decreasing level of morale, thus negatively influencing their assessment of the situation.⁵

Except for the single occasions when high-ranking military or political leaders inspected the troops, evidence of a senior commander's presence at the front line was difficult to find at Dobro Pole. Without citing any particular units, General Toshev supports this idea by providing information from Bulgarian and German headquarters inspection reports, which reveals that some of the division and brigade commanders did not visit regularly their troops' positions and did not communicate directly with their subordinates.⁶ The absence of the commanders from the front lines and the lack of effective communication created a perception among the enlisted Soldiers and even some of the junior officers in the ranks that the senior leadership was not adequately engaged with their well-being and lacked clear vision for the successful outcome of the campaign.

Furthermore, a perception of weak Bulgarian leadership, whose decisions were influenced by the German senior commanders, existed among the Bulgarian troops on the Macedonian Front. Even though the German officers provided valuable guidance and applied the combat experience gained at the Western Front, the attempts to exercise extensive control over the Bulgarian Army units by establishing German division and corps headquarters and the existing paradigm among the Bulgarian troops of the Germans as being ignorant and alien to the Bulgarian mentality, had additional negative impact on the troops' morale. General Toshev summarized the predominant Bulgarian attitude towards the German leadership: "They [the German commanders and headquarters] were looked upon as grantees who were intruded upon them [the Bulgarian troops]."⁷ Nevertheless, both the German and Bulgarian High Commands were confident in the qualities of the Bulgarian Soldier and the fighting spirit he had demonstrated in earlier engagements and during the first of days of the Entente offensive in 1918.

However, the expectations of the two commands of the Bulgarian troops' endurance were met only during the first days of the Entente offensive at Dobro Pole. Azmanov described the dominating spirit among the Bulgarian troops after the extensive artillery bombardment during the first night of the battle: "To counterbalance the exhaustion in moments of great peril, an inner strength emerges in the hearts, which turns people into heroes. Instead of being demoralized, our Soldiers engaged the enemy advance guard elements in high spirit and fully mobilized."⁸ Despite the tenacious resistance of the troops, however, the ineffective artillery support, the lack of sufficient reserves to enhance their efforts, and the notable absence of commanders, either due to the high level of casualties or withdrawal of their headquarters, exceeded the limits of their physical and moral strengths. The 30th Sheinovo Regiment continued to withdraw in contact with the Serbian troops until 22 September, even though three quarters of the officers were not in the ranks any more and the number of troops was less than 400. Due to the high number of casualties on 14 and 15 September, instead of Dobro Pole (Good Field), the battleground became known among the survivors of the 30th Regiment as Karvavo Pole (Bloody Field).⁹

At Doiran, General Vazov not only gave clear guidance to his subordinate commanders on how to maintain the motivation of their troops but also demonstrated it through his constant personal presence across the entire position. Furthermore, the direct contact with his Soldiers and encouragement of the weak and hesitant among them created the cohesive and highly motivated unit that brought about the defeat of the British Salonika Army in the autumn of 1918. Thus, the fighting spirit and determination to serve their country, which had existed among the troops in both areas of operations since the

beginning of the campaign, was further bolstered and maintained by the 9th Division commander at Doiran, personally and through his subordinate commanders. Furthermore, thanks to the offensive mindset that General Vazov had instilled into his Soldiers, once the Anglo-Greek troops were defeated and pushed back to their initial attacking positions, the 9th Division commander after assessing the status of his unit, reported to the higher headquarters that his division was ready for a counteroffensive.¹⁰ As the analysis of the author of this thesis and the assessment of most of the participants in the events of the autumn of 1918 suggest, the level of morale and commitment of the troops, maintained by their commanders, was the second major factor that influenced the outcome of the operations at Dobro Pole and Doiran.

Time

Time has always been a critical factor in military operations, particularly in defense. In the case of Dobro Pole and Doiran, the defenders had an equal amount of time to prepare and fortify their positions. The commanders and their units, however, made different use of the time available. Even though different units occupied Dobro Pole between 1916 and 1918, the position was mainly under the control of the 2nd and the 3rd Infantry Divisions, which also defended it in the autumn of 1918. General Ribarov and his 3rd Division initially lost significant time trying to determine the most appropriate location for the main line of the defense. General Burmov, whose 2nd Division assumed control over Dobro Pole later during the course of the campaign, relied heavily on the strength of the position, conditioned by the restricted terrain, as well as on the fighting spirit of his troops. Even though certain improvements to the defensive positions were made, the fortifications could not provide adequate protection for the defenders,

particularly against the heavy barrage fire of the French artillery. When General Rusev assumed command of the 2nd Division in the summer of 1918, he attempted to mitigate the deficiencies he saw in the defensive system but time was already working against him.

General Vazov, on the other hand, was aware that time was never sufficient for the defender. The time that the units at Doiran had on their disposal to prepare for the decisive operations in 1918 was equal to those defending further west. However, due to the appropriate selection of the defensive positions back in 1915-1916, the preparatory works of the 9th Division were a continuation and improvement on the efforts of the units and commanders that had previously occupied this sector. The major contribution of General Vazov, after assuming command of the Doiran sector in 1917, was his quick assessment of the position and analysis of the degree of engineer work necessary to ensure success. Efficiently using the lulls in the fight, by 1918 General Vazov and the troops under his command established a formidable defense that gained both the recognition of the Allies Commander, General d'Esperey and the respect of the British Salonika Army Commander, General Milne.

Leadership

Leadership, as the last independent variable that the author examined in this study, was the one that most strongly influenced the dependent variable--the outcome of the Bulgarian Army operations at Dobro Pole and Doiran. The conclusions in this last area of analysis are based on the assessment of the commanders' abilities to understand the specifics of the environment they were operating in, visualize the end state for their operations, convey their intent to their subordinates and superiors, and direct their staffs

and subordinate commanders through planning, preparation and execution of the operation. For each area of operations, the author of this thesis analyzed the leadership qualities of the senior Bulgarian commanders and their abilities to lead and motivate their subordinates, communicate effectively with and influence their superiors and coalition partners, create positive environment and develop their subordinate commanders, and persistently prepare for and accomplish their mission.

Even though the leadership qualities of the Bulgarian Army commanders at the Macedonian Front in 1918 had been tested multiple times during the wars preceding World War I, the Macedonian campaign presented a new set of challenges for them, which required a different operational approach. The first of these challenges was the very nature of the conflict--protracted defensive warfare--as opposed to the rapid offensive actions in which the Bulgarian military leadership and troops had become very proficient.

Another consideration for the senior commanders at the Macedonian Front was the influence of a powerful ally and the existing cultural differences and discrepancies in the objectives the coalition partners sought to achieve. While in earlier conflicts Bulgaria was the lead nation in the coalition and the senior military leaders had the necessary combat power, resources, and confidence to impose their decisions, during World War I they had to achieve the appropriate balance between cooperating with the German Army as strategically important and experienced partner on one hand, and preserving their dignity as commanders of their own troops, on the other. Furthermore, unlike the Balkan Wars, on the Macedonian Front the Bulgarian and German units had to conduct combined operations down to tactical level. The perception among the Bulgarian Soldiers

of foreign commanders leading them in combat and the mistrust and lack of confidence among the German leadership towards the Bulgarian commanders created a considerable amount of friction between the two armies, which they were not able to overcome during the entire campaign.

Finally, maintaining the morale, fighting spirit, and commitment of the troops, which had never been an issue for the Bulgarian Soldiers thus far, also turned out to be a significant challenge for the military leadership. Thus, to a large extent the success of the Bulgarian commanders on the Macedonian Front in the long run was dependent upon their ability to shift their mindset from only fighting the battle towards solving the full set of problems that the new operational environment presented to them. As the analysis of the senior commanders' performance at Dobro Pole revealed, many of them were not successful in dealing with those challenges. Some of them did not recognize them throughout the entire course of the campaign.

The attritional warfare of World War I campaigns required perseverance and thorough preparation of the defenses, integration of the artillery fire, and motivation of the subordinate troops. The 3rd Division Commander, General Ribarov, showed little initiative to adjust his positions in order to achieve advantage over the enemy, and he also lacked comprehensive situational awareness in the preparation and execution phase of the operation. Furthermore, the analysis suggests that he was probably affected by the adverse conditions at the Macedonian Front and did not display enough confidence and competence towards the end of the campaign. Other senior commanders had also demonstrated weakened will and lost physical contact with their subordinate troops, after having spent years on the same front line.¹¹

Likewise, General Burmov, while in command of the 2nd Division and as a Chief of Staff of the Active Army at the end of the war, did not maintain adequate situational awareness and expand his knowledge to match the position he occupied. Nor did he develop a true understanding of the effects that the protracted campaign had on the Soldiers in the trenches. General Rusev, on the other hand, quickly grasped the scale of the threat when he assumed command of the 2nd Division. The deficiencies in his leadership style, however, were related to his ability to build trust in his superiors and resolve the conflict with the German LXI Corps Commander, which led to his replacement in the height of the fight. Finally, General Todorov's leadership character and appearance at the front line had an immediate but short-term impact on the course of the operation and the overall fighting spirit of the Bulgarian troops. However, his position of a commander-in-chief required a higher-level directions and guidance to all Bulgarian and German commanders on the entire Macedonian Front.

Most of the junior commanders at Dobro Pole made the necessary efforts to improve the environment in their units and took care of the welfare of their troops, as it was the case with the 30th (Sheinovo) Regiment.¹² In his analysis of the lower tactical level leadership at Dobro Pole, Colonel Azmanov expressed his high opinion of the work of the officers in the ranks in maintaining the morale of their Soldiers.¹³ However, the lack of initiative among the senior leaders to engage more actively with their subordinates in order to mitigate the negative effects that the worsening conditions on the front had upon them and convince them of the ultimate success of their mission, created an overall feeling that the outcome of the war was already predetermined. As Colonel Andreev pointed out, General Ribarov addressed his subordinate commanders' requests

for additional supplies and ammunition by issuing written guidance in which he only demanded their and their troops' self-sacrifice.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the initial days of the Allies' offensive proved that the fighting spirit and commitment of the Bulgarian troops was not lower than their adversaries' were. It was not until the Entente troops seized the forward strong points of the defense after severe fighting, that the Bulgarian troops started withdrawing in a poorly organized manner, close to disarray in some sectors. However, that was not as much due to their poor morale, as to the lack of cohesion within the units, particularly at division level, and the absence of a confident leader, who could unify their efforts. General Toshev provides his own assessment of the situation: "It is not true that the Allies possessed much higher morale. Even though they were well fed and equipped, the prolonged stay at the front lines, away from their home has already significantly shaken their fighting spirit. They had, however, the energetic General d'Esperey; after realizing the poor condition of his troops, he planned to improve it with a decisive strike against the enemy."¹⁵ As accurate as this assessment could be, the Bulgarian Army had an equally capable commander, who defeated General d'Esperey's offensive plan at another sector of the front.

The majority of the authors who have analyzed the battle at Doiran in 1918 identify several groups of factors that contributed to the success of the 9th Infantry (Pleven) Division against the British, Greek, and French troops. These were the high morale and commitment of the Bulgarian troops, the thorough preparation of the units and the comprehensive organization of the defense, and the remarkable leadership of the division commander, General Vazov.¹⁶ Richard Hall writes in his book *The Balkan Breakthrough*: "The Doiran success raised the question as to why the Bulgarians stopped

the British and the Greeks but collapsed in front of the French and Serbs. One factor was the quality of the defensive works. Another factor was General Vazov himself.”¹⁷

Even though he had defeated the Allies’ offensive at Doiran in 1917, General Vazov did not assume that he would have the same success in the autumn of 1918 by just keeping his troops in the same positions. Instead, he analyzed the course of the battles and implemented the necessary changes, developing his defense in depth and achieving synchronization between the maneuver units and the supporting artillery fire. In order to provide freedom of action to his subordinate commanders, he allocated sufficient reserves at every level, which allowed their decentralized employment in a timely manner, depending on the situation. This, in its turn, required a high level of morale, cohesion, and trust between commanders and troops, which he also sought to achieve at all times.

The 9th Division Commander encouraged his subordinate commanders to communicate with their troops and often used to demonstrate the care for his people. During his retirement ceremony, General Vazov revealed his leadership philosophy, or a testament, as he called it, for the generations of Bulgarian officers that were to fight other battles of significant importance in the future: “In order to achieve a decisive victory, it is necessary for the leaders to get to know and love their Soldiers and subordinates, to take care of them, to win their trust and be close to them in moments of peril.”¹⁸

General Vazov was not only able to gain the confidence of his superiors and the trust of his subordinates, but also the respect of the major Bulgarian ally and a coalition leader--Germany. Even though he occasionally clashed with the German leadership, whether requesting additional supplies for his troops or insisting on the organization of the defensive positions and training of his units in accordance with his vision as a

commander, General Vazov's efforts were always appreciated by the German command. He was even decorated with an Iron Cross First Class in the course of the campaign.¹⁹ The German General Dieterich gives a short description of the Doiran defense: "The heights west of Lake Doiran were assigned to the 9th Division under the command of the capable General Vazov."²⁰

Furthermore, due to his capabilities as a commander and the ethical attitude of the troops under his command towards their adversaries, General Vazov had gained the respect of his opponents, too. Long after the end of the war, in 1936 he was personally invited as a delegate to the congress of the British Legion. When Field Marshal Lord Milne, the commander that General Vazov defeated at Doiran, greeted him and the rest of the Bulgarian delegation upon their arrival at the railway station, he admitted: "I feel great respect towards the Bulgarian warriors, since they, just like the British, were not only brave, but gentlemen too."²¹ When he was about to give his speech in front of the congress, General Vazov was introduced in the following way: "General Vazov is one of the few foreign officers whose name is part of our official history." Yet, the victor of Doiran, like a real leader, did not take the laurels for himself: "In many other occasions I was the subject of great interest and respect. Why? Because of my humble personality? No! In my person, the British were rendering the deserved honor to the 9th Infantry Plevna Division!"²²

Recommendations

The comparative study of the Bulgarian Army operations at Dobro Pole and Doiran provides useful insights of how the different approach of the commanders can influence the planning and preparation of their operations, the long-term commitment of

their troops, and the cohesion and proficiency of their units. Although this analysis is generally applicable to any operational environment, it is particularly important in protracted conflicts, highly demanding in both the physical and moral hardness of the troops and their commanders. Understanding the deficiencies in the senior leadership's performance on one hand and the qualities and type of expertise that allowed them to lead in an exemplary manner, on the other, can help the officers corps draw up lessons and focus their efforts in the fields that require improvement to ensure mission success.

The new challenges the Bulgarian Army faces these days, with troops deployed in operations around the globe, require that its commanders demonstrate a wider spectrum of qualities. In particular, the organizational level leaders have to be able to cope with the complexity of the new operational environment and the prolonged and exhausting type of warfare, analyze all the factors that shape this environment, and prepare and lead well-trained and resilient Soldiers with high level of morale to achieve success. In addition, the contemporary leaders must develop an understanding of the functioning and decision-making process of the political leadership and closely interact with and provide expertise for them. As the Bulgarian Army units will almost inevitably operate within a coalition format in any type of future engagement, the ability to build teamwork and cohesion is even more important. This is further linked to the commanders' appearance and ability to influence their coalition partners' decisions or convince them to accept their own, based on their comprehensive situational understanding and sound judgments. Examples of both inefficient performance and successful achievements in these areas could be found on the Macedonian Front in 1918. Therefore, the engagement of the Bulgarian Army in World War I and its operations at Dobro Pole and Doiran in particular, could be quite

beneficial if used as case studies in the professional development of organizational level leaders and as a basis for more comprehensive analysis of the commanders' leadership qualities and their applicability today.

Furthermore, the Bulgarian Army operations during World War I provide a beneficial ground for further research and more comprehensive analysis in several areas, which might be of interest for the Army as an institution, its leadership, and the organizations that are tasked to provide the knowledge and expertise to develop future leaders. Since the main area of analysis of this paper is the Bulgarian Army leadership and, as the thesis suggests, it was the main factor influencing the outcome of the operations on the Macedonian Front, a broader analysis of the qualities of the officers corps at that time could be of value for the contemporary military education institutions. Furthermore, a detailed study of this kind might reveal that leadership had had much greater influence on the flow of events in terms of decisions taken by the commanders, preparedness of the troops, and level of morale and fighting spirit. Such analysis could lead to an assessment of the effectiveness of the officers' education, training, and professional development or help identify possible flaws in doctrine, organization of the army, and performance of the institutions responsible for the preparation of the Army leaders as related to the contemporary environment.

Another possible field of study could be the process of development of the plans for the participation of Bulgaria in World War I and the efficiency of the interaction between the civilian and military leadership. The purpose of such strategic level analysis could be to identify how the political goals of the government were aligned with the military objectives of the campaign and whether the necessary ways and means to

achieve those ends had been appropriately employed and their efficiency, availability, and sufficiency properly assessed.

In addition, as some of the sources used in this thesis reveal, there was an absence of significant involvement of the Bulgarian senior military commanders in the initial planning, the negotiation of the military aspects of the alliance between Bulgaria, Austria-Hungary and Germany, and even at the signing of the military convention between the three countries. Thus, of a particular interest for the contemporary strategic-level planner would probably be research on the conduct of the negotiations between Bulgaria and the Entente on one hand and the Central Powers, on the other, which preceded the involvement of the country in the conflict in 1915. A further assessment of the decisions made by Tsar Ferdinand and his reluctance to employ the expertise of the Bulgarian Army leadership when making his judgments could reveal whether neglecting the main element of national power at strategic level had predetermined the conditions that led to the disastrous outcome of the war for Bulgaria.

Likewise, more comprehensive research, down to the tactical through operational level of war, would facilitate the understanding of the professional officers of their role as organizational leaders to nest the concept of their operations within the overall political purpose of the government and their supreme commanders' intent. More importantly, during the preparation and conduct of the Bulgarian Army campaign on the Macedonian Front, of critical importance was the ability of the senior commanders to provide the necessary input to influence the decisions of the head of state in order to ensure that the objectives determined by him were attainable through the means they had on their disposal. Since the focus of this thesis was primarily on the preparation and conduct of

tactical level operations, a more detailed study of this aspect of the political-military relationship could be used to examine its effect on the performance of the Bulgarian Army during the three-year deployment on the Southern Front.

As the opinions of the majority of the Bulgarian senior leaders and authors assert, the major reason, beyond the conduct of the tactical operations, that led to the Central Powers' defeat in the Balkans was the static defense approach imposed by the German High Command. Thus, the last potential direction of analysis that the author of this thesis will suggest will be the applicability of offense-orientated operations in the beginning of the campaign and its impact on the outcome of the operations on the Macedonian Front, hence the entire war. This analysis could be extended to assess the likely effect of a major Bulgarian counteroffensive in September 1918, once the bulk of the Entente troops were committed deep in the mountains north of Dobro Pole and the rest of it almost completely destroyed at Doiran. If the complete defeat of the Allies was not a feasible objective, such an operation could have threatened the Entente Salonika Army's rear, thus limiting its advance and creating more favorable conditions for the Central Powers when the armistice was signed.

¹Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 88-89.

²Azmanov, *Urocut ot Dobro pole*, 25.

³Famili Memorabilia, "Salonika and Macedonia 1916-1918."

⁴Luigi Villari, *The Macedonian Campaign* (London: T. Fisher Unwin Ltd., 1923), 232-233.

⁵Stanchev, *Sheinovtzi na Dobro pole*, 96-97.

⁶Toshev, *Pobedeni bez da budem biti*, 193-194.

⁷Ibid., 27.

⁸Azmanov, *Urocut ot Dobro pole*, 42.

⁹Stanchev, *Sheinovtzi na Dobro pole*, 86-92.

¹⁰At one stage of the battle, the First Army Commander, General Nerezov, went forward to the front line to feel the pulse of the fight and bolster the spirit of his troops. At this point, he delegated General Vazov the authority to run the current operations of the whole army. According to Nedev, assessing the high morale of the troops and the development of the operation, he proposed to the Active Army Headquarters that the First Army, supported by the Second Army, which had not been engaged thus far, to initiate a counteroffensive. See Nedev, *Doiranskata epopeya*, 202-203. Even though an operational plan for an offensive against the allied troops at Salonika with the 9th Division as the main effort existed at that time (Nedev, *Doiranskata epopeya*, 155-156), it is not certain whether the Bulgarian Army would have been able to sustain such an offensive for a long period of time. In either case, the German command rejected the plan as too risky. See Palmer, "Defeat of Bulgaria: The Central Powers Begin to Crack," 2985.

¹¹Toshev, *Pobedeni bez da budem biti*, 193.

¹²Stanchev, *Sheinovtzi na Dobro pole*, 21-25.

¹³Azmanov, *Urocut ot Dobro pole*, 24.

¹⁴Andreev, "Kum Dobro pole prez 1916," 87-89.

¹⁵Toshev, *Pobedeni bez da budem biti*, 161.

¹⁶Colonel Karaivanov brings up the high morale of the troops and the comprehensive organization and preparation of the defense, both achieved as a result of General Vazov's personal involvement and guidance to his staff and subordinate commanders, as the major factors for the 9th Division's success at Doiran. See Karaivanov, "Otbranata na Doiranskata poziciya prez esenta na 1918," 135-139. Nedev, too, points out the high fighting spirit of the division, largely due to General Vazov's appearance as commander. He further breaks down the preparation of the defense as key factor into organization of the artillery support, allocation of the reserves (planned in accordance with the division commander's guidance), and the coordination of the direct and indirect fire support with the infantry counterattacks through continuous rehearsals. See Nedev, *Doiranskata epopeya*, 239-249.

¹⁷Hall, *Balkan Breakthrough*, 143.

¹⁸Vazov, *Zhivotopisni belezhki*, 113.

¹⁹Ibid., 30.

²⁰Dieterich, “Krayat na svetovnata voina na Makedonskiya front,” 44.

²¹Vazov, *Zhivotopisni belezhi*, 119.

²²*Ibid.*, 120.

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